

The Thief of Bagdad

Achmed Abdullah

THE THIEF OF BAGDAD





"The Thief of Bagdad"—(Douglas Fairbanks).

THE THIEF OF BAGDAD

BY
ACHMED ABDULLAH
*"The Writer of Many Lands
and Many People"*

Based on
DOUGLAS FAIRBANKS'
Fantasy of the Arabian Nights



ILLUSTRATED WITH SCENES
FROM THE PHOTO PLAY

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DOUGLAS FAIRBANKS'
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BY
ELTON THOMAS

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and a short version
BY

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*Gift
Mrs. E. H. Suttal
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To
Jean Wick





CHAPTER I



CHAPTER I

IN THE Orient's motley, twisted annals the tale of Ahmed el-Bagdadi's—"the Thief of Bagdad," as he is called in the ancient records—search for happiness, which is by the same token the tale of his adventures and exploits and love, has assumed in the course of time the character of something homeric, something epic and fabulous, something close-woven to the golden loom of the desert in both pattern and sweep of romance.

It is mentioned with pride by his own tribe, the Benni Hussaynieh, a raucous-tongued, hard-riding breed of Bedawins, brittle of honor and greedy of gain, of whom—due to a father, tired of the sterile Arabian sands and eager for the pleasures of bazar and marketplace—he was the city-bred descendant. It is spoken of with a mixture of awe and envy by the Honorable Guild of Bagdad Thieves of whom he was once a keen and highly respected member. It is wide-blown through the flaps of the no-

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mads' black felt tents from Mecca to Jeddah and beyond; berry-brown, wizen old women cackle its gliding gossip as they bray the coffee for the morning meal or rock the blown-up milk skins upon their knees till the butter rolls yellow and frothing; and, on the sun-cracked lips of the cameleers, on the honeyed, lying lips of overland traders and merchants, the tale has drifted South as far as the Sahara, North to the walls of grey, stony Bokhara, Southeast and Northeast to Pekin's carved dragon gates and the orchid plains and ochre mountains of Hindustan, and West to the pleasant, odorous gardens of Morocco where garrulous white-beards comment upon it as they digest the brave deeds of the past in the curling, blue smoke of their water-pipes.

"*Wah hyat Ullah*—as God liveth!" their telling begins. "This Ahmed el-Bagdadi—what a keen lad he was! A deer in running! A cat in climbing! A snake in twisting! A hawk in pouncing! A dog in scenting! Fleet as a hare! Stealthy as a fox! Tenacious as a wolf! Brave as a lion! Strong as an elephant in mating-time!"

Or, taking a blade of grass between thumb and second finger, another ancient will exclaim:

“*Wah hyat hatha el-awd wah er-rub el-mabood*—by the life of this stem and the blessed Lord God! Never, in all Islam, lived there one to equal Ahmed the Thief in quality and pride, the scope and exquisite charm of his thievery!”

Or perhaps:

“*Wah hyat duqny*—by the honor of these my whiskers! Once, O True Believers, it happened in Bagdad the Golden! Aye—may I eat dirt—may I not be father to my sons if I lie! But once, indeed, it happened in Bagdad the Golden!”

And then the full, rich tale. The wondrous ending.

Yet the tale's original cause was simple enough, consisting in the snatching of a well-filled purse, a hungry belly craving food, and the jerk and pull of a magic rope woven from the hair of a purple-faced witch of the left-handed sect; while the scene was the Square of

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the One-Eyed Jew—thus called for reasons lost in the mists of antiquity—in the heart of Bagdad.

Across the South end of the Square straddled the Mosque of Seven Swords, raised on a flight of broad marble steps as on a base, lifting the apex of its wide horseshoe gateway fifty feet into the air, its walls untwining sinuous arabesques of yellow and elfin-green faience beneath the pigeon-blue glare of the sky, its lonely minaret lovely and pointed and snowy-white. East the latticed Bazar of the Red Sea Traders filtered the sun on rugs and silks, on copper vessels and jewelry and thin gold-inlaid perfume bottles, in an ever-shifting saraband of shadows, rose and purple and sapphire and purest emerald. North a broad, tree-lined avenue swept on toward the palace of the Caliph of the Faithful that etched the horizon with a tortured abandon of spires and turrets and bartizans. West squatted a packed wilderness of narrow, cobbled alleys; a labyrinth of flat-roofed Arab houses with dead-white walls facing the street, but blossoming toward the inner courtyards with palm and olive and rose-bush.

Here, too, was the dim, tortuous Bazar of the Potters, plum-colored Nubians brought as slaves from Africa, and, farther on, a cemetery criss-crossed with Barbary fig and the tiny stone cups filled with grain and water for the birds of passage, in obedience to the blessed Moslem tradition.

In the very centre of the square of the One-Eyed Jew a great fountain played with sleepy, silvered cadences. And here, on a stone slab a little to one side of the fountain, Ahmed the Thief lay flat on his stomach, his chin cupped in his hands, the sun rays warming his bare, bronzed back, his black eyes darting in all directions like dragon-flies to give warning of rich and careless citizens who might pass within reach of his agile hands and whose purses might be had for a little soft twist and tug.

The Square and the streets and bazars were teeming with humanity, not to mention humanity's wives and children and mothers-in-law and visiting country cousins. For today was a holiday: the day before the *Lelet el-Kadr*, the "Night of Honor," the anniversary of the oc-

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casion when the Koran was revealed to the Prophet Mohammed in the year 609.

So throngs milled and moiled everywhere: people of half the Orient's crazy-quilt of races, Arabs and Seljuks and Osmanlis, Tartars and Syrians, Turkomans and Uzbeks, Bokharans, Moors and Egyptians, with here and there men from the Farther East, Chinese, Hindus and Malays, traveling merchants these, come to Bagdad to swap the products of their home lands for what the Arabs markets had to offer. They were all making merry after the Orient's immemorial fashion, resplendently, extravagantly, and noisily: the men swaggering and strutting, fingering their jeweled daggers and cocking their immense turbans at a rakish, devil-may-care angle; the women adjusting their thin-meshed face veils which did not need adjusting at all; the little boys seeing if they could shout richer and louder abuse than the other little boys; the little girls rivaling each other in the gay pansy-shades of their dresses and the consumption of greasy candy.

There were ambulant coffee houses filled with men and women in their silken, colorful holi-

day best, listening to singers and professional story tellers, smoking and chatting, looking at jugglers, knife twirlers, sword swallowers, and dancing-boys. There were cook shops and lemonade stands, toy booths and merry-go-rounds. There were bear leaders, ape leaders, fakirs, fortune tellers, buffoons and Punch and Judy shows. There were itinerant dervish preachers chanting the glories of Allah the One, of the Prophet Mohammed and the Forty-Seven True Saints. There were bell-shaped tents where golden-skinned, blue-tattooed Bedawin maidens trilled and quavered their desert songs, to the accompaniment of tamborines and shrill scrannel pipes. There was everything which makes life worth the living, including a great deal of love making—the love making of the Orient which is frank, direct, and a trifle indelicate to Western ears and prejudices.

There were of course the many cries of the street.

“Sweet water! Sweet water, and gladden thy soul! Lemonade! Lemonade here!” cried the sellers of that luxury, clanking their brass cups together.

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“O chick pease! O pips!” shouted the vendors of parched grains. “Good for the liver—the stomach! To sharpen the teeth!”

“In thy protection, O my Head, O my Eyes!” moaned a peasant, drunk with hasheesh, whom a turbanded policeman, wielding his rhinoceros-hide whip with all his strength, was flogging toward the station house, the peasant’s wife following with loud complaints of: “*Yah Gharati—yah Dahrwati!* O thou my Calamity—O thou my Shame!”

“Bless the Prophet and give way to our great Pasha!” exclaimed the panting, black slave who was running by the side of a grandee’s carriage as it crossed the Square.

“O Daughter of the Devil! O Commodity on which Money is lost! O thou especially not wanted!” shrieked a woman as she yanked her tiny, pert-eyed girl-child from beneath the crimson paper partition of a sugar candy booth. The next moment she fondled and kissed her. “O Peace of my Soul!” she cooed. “O Chief Pride of thy Father’s House—though only a girl!”

“The grave is the darkness! Good deeds are

the lamps!" wailed the blind beggar woman, rattling two dry sticks.

Friend would meet friend and greet each other with all the extravagance of the Orient, throwing themselves upon each other's breasts, placing right arm over left shoulder, squeezing like wrestlers, with intermittent hugs and caresses, then laying cheek delicately against cheek and flat palm against palm, at the same time making the loud, smacking noise of many kisses in the air.

Mild-mannered, sleepy-eyed and suave, they would burst into torrents of rage at the next moment because of some fancied insult. Their nostrils would quiver and they would become furious as Bengal tigers. Then would come streams of obscene abuse, carefully chosen phrases of that picaresque vituperation in which the East excels.

"Owl! Donkey! Christian! Jew! Leper! Pig bereft of gratitude, understanding, and the average decencies!" This from an elderly Arab whose long white beard gave him an aspect of patriarchal dignity in ludicrous contrast with the foul invective which he was using.

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“Unclean and swinish foreigner! May thy countenance be cold! May dogs defile thy mother’s grave!”

Came the reply courteous:

“Basest of illegitimate hyenas! Father of seventeen dogs! Bath servant! Seller of pig’s tripe!”

And then the final retort, drawling, slow-voiced, but bristling with all the venom of the East:

“Ho! Thy maternal aunt had no nose, O thou brother of a naughty sister!”

Then a physical assault, an exchange of blows, fists going like flails, until the grinning, spitting, crimson-turbaned policeman separated the combatants and cuffed them both with cheerful, democratic impartiality.

“*Hai! Hai! Hai!*” laughed the onlookers.

“*Hai! Hai! Hayah! Hai!*” laughed the Thief of Bagdad; and the very next moment, as a paunchy, grey-bearded money lender stopped at the fountain and bent to sip a drink of water with cupped hands, Ahmed’s agile fingers decended, twisted, tugged imperceptibly and came up with a well-filled purse.

Another imperceptible jerk of these agile, brown fingers; and while his body lay flat and motionless, while his eyes were as innocent as those of a child, the purse plopped into his baggy trousers of purple, silver-threaded silk that were tight about the ankles and that, only the night before, he had acquired—without paying for them—in the Bazar of the Persian Weavers.

Minute after minute he lay there, laughing, watching, exchanging jests with people here and there in the crowd; and many of those who stopped by the fountain to drink or to gossip, helped to swell the loot in Ahmed's loose breeches.

There was amongst that loot, to describe just a few items, a knotted handkerchief, clinking with coined silver and filched from the woolen folds of a hulking, bullying, beetle-browed Tartar camel master's burnoose; a tinkling ruby-and-moonstone girdle gem from the waist shawl of one of the Caliph's favorite Circasian slave girls who moved through the Square and past the fountain escorted by a dozen armed eunuchs; a ring of soft, hammered gold set with

an enormous star-sapphire from the henna-stained thumb of a visiting Stambul dandy whom Ahmed, lest the stranger spot his brocaded robe, had helped to a drink of water, and had been rewarded by the other's courtly: "May the Prophet Mohammed repay thee for thy kindness!"—rewarded too, and rather more substantially, by the afore-mentioned ring.

Ahmed was about to call it a day when there came out of the Bazar of the Red Sea Traders a rich merchant, a certain Tagi Kahn, well known through all Bagdad because of his wealth and his extravagance—an extravagance, be it added, which he centred on his own person and the enjoyment of his five senses, and which he made up for by extreme penury where the poor and the needy were concerned, and by lending money at exorbitant rates, taking as security the cow and the unborn calf.

He walked with a mincing step, his wicked, shriveled old face topped ludicrously by a coquettish turban of pale cerise, his scanty beard dyed blue with indigo, his pointed finger nails gilt in a foppish manner, his lean body clad in green silk, and holding in his bony right hand

a large cluster of lilies at which he sniffed.

All this Ahmed saw and disliked. Saw, furthermore, protruding a little from Tagi Kahn's waist shawl, the sagging plumpness of an embroidered purse. A fat purse! A rich, swollen, bloated purse! A purse to stir the imagination of both the righteous and the unrighteous!

"Mine—by the red pig's bristles!" thought Ahmed, as the other passed the fountain. "Mine—or may I never laugh again!"

Already his right hand had descended. Already his agile fingers were curling like question marks. Already the purse was sliding gently from Tagi Kahn's waist shawl when—for let us remember that Ahmed was stretched flat on his stomach, his bare back warmed by the sun—an inquisitive mosquito lit on his shoulder and stung him painfully.

He wiggled; twisted.

His tapering fingers slipped and jerked.

And Tagi Kahn, feeling the jerk, looked up, and saw his purse in Ahmed's hand.

"Thief! Thief! Thief!" he yelled, reaching up, clutching at the purse, grabbing its other end. "Give it back to me!"

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“No! No!” protested Ahmed, pulling the purse away and transferring it quickly to his left hand. “It is mine own purse! I am not a thief! I am an honest man! It is you, yourself, who are the thief!”

And, appealing to the people who came crowding up on a run, he continued heatedly, with every expression of injured innocence:

“Behold me this Tagi Kahn! This oppressor of widows and orphans! This worshiper before the unclean gods of compound interest! He accuses me—*me*—of being a thief!”

“You *are* a thief!” bellowed the merchant. “You stole my purse!”

“The purse is mine!”

“No—mine—O Father of a bad Smell!”

“Goat!” came Ahmed’s reply. “Goat of an odor most goatish! Abuser of the Salt!”—and he jumped down from the ledge and faced the other.

Standing there in the bright, yellow sunlight, poised on the balls of his bare feet, ready for either flight or combat as the odds might advise, he was a fine figure of a man: short rather than tall, but perfectly proportioned from narrow

foot to curly head, with a splendid breadth of chest and shoulders, and long muscles that were like running water. There was here none of your clumsy, flabby, overfed Nordic flesh, like a greasy, pink-and-white suet pudding, but a smooth, hairless torso, with the crunching strength of a man and the grace of a woman. The face was clean-shaven except for an impudent little mustache that quivered with well-simulated wrath as he heaped insults upon the stammering, raging Tagi Khan.

The crowd laughed and applauded—for Tagi Khan had not many friends in Bagdad—until finally a gigantic, black-bearded Captain of the Watch shouldered his way through the throng.

“Be quiet, both you fighting-cocks!” he thundered threateningly. “This is Bagdad, the Caliph’s town, where they hang men in chains from the Gate of Lions for shouting too loudly in the marketplace. And now—softly, softly—what is the trouble?”

“He took my purse, O Protector of the Righteous!” wailed Tagi Khan.

“The purse was never his,” asserted Ahmed, boldly displaying the disputed article and hold-

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ing it high. "It is a most precious heirloom bequeathed to me by my late father—may his soul dwell in Paradise!"

"A lie!" exclaimed the other.

"The truth!" insisted Ahmed.

"A lie! A lie! A lie!" the merchant's voice rose a hectic octave.

"Softly, softly!" came the Captain's warning; and he went on: "There is but one way to decide this matter. Whoever owns this purse knows its contents."

"A wise man!" commented the crowd.

"As wise as Solomon, the King of the Jews!"

Unblushingly, the Captain of the Watch accepted the flattery. He stuck out his great beard like a batteringram; raised hairy, high-veined hands.

"Wise indeed am I!" he admitted calmly. "And now—my Tagi Khan—since you claim this purse, suppose you tell me what its contents are?"

"Gladly! Readily! Easily!" came the merchant's triumphant reply. "My purse holds three golden tomans from Persia, one chipped at the edge; a bright, carved silver medjidieh

from Stambul; eighteen various gold pieces from Bokhara, Khiva, and Samarkand; a shoe-shaped candareen from far Peking; and a handful of small coins from the lands of the Franks—cursed be all unbelievers! Give me the purse! It is mine!”

“One moment,” said the Captain. He turned to Ahmed. “And what do you claim the purse to contain?”

“Why—” laughed the Thief of Bagdad—“it contains nothing at all, O Great Lord! And—” opening the purse and turning it inside out—“here is the proof!” But he kept his right leg very quiet to keep the stolen money, which he had plopped into his baggy breeches, from rattling against the rest of his loot and thus giving him away.

Laughter, then, from the crowd. Riotous, exaggerated, falsetto Oriental laughter—presently topped by the Captain’s words:

“You spoke the truth, young man!”

He winked at Ahmed shamelessly and brazenly. For a year or two earlier he had borrowed a sum of money from Tagi Khan; and, the first of every month, had paid high interest

and substantial instalments without, thanks to the other's miraculous calculations, being ever able to diminish the principal.

He addressed the merchant with crushing, chilly words:

“Consider, O Wart, that the Prophet Mohammed—on Him the blessings and the peace!—recommended honesty as a charming and worthwhile virtue! No—no . . . ” as Tagi Khan was about to break into a flood of bitter protestations—“consider, furthermore, that the tongue is the enemy of the neck!”

With which cryptic threat he swaggered off, bumping his sabre tip martially against the stone pavement, while the Thief of Bagdad thumbed his nose insultingly at the infuriated merchant and turned West across the Square, toward the Bazar of the Potters.

Ahmed was pleased with himself, the sunshine, and the world at large.

Money he had! Money that would be eagerly welcomed by his pal, an old man who had first initiated him into the Honorable Guild of Bagdad Thieves and had taught him the tricks and principles of their ancient profession.

Today Ahmed was a greater thief than his former teacher. But he still loved the other, a certain Hassan el-Toork, nicknamed Bird-of-Evil because of his scrawny neck, his claw-like hands, his parrot's beak and beady, purple-black eyes; and he shared everything with him.

Yes. Hassan el-Toork would be glad of the money—and the other rich loot.

“But here it was getting on toward the noon hour, and Ahmed had not yet broken his fast. His stomach grumbled and rumbled, protestingly, challengingly. Should he spend his money on food? No! Not unless he absolutely had to!

“I shall follow my nose!” he said to himself. “Aye! I shall follow this clever nose of mine than which, except for my hands, I have no better friend in the world. Lead on, nose!” he laughed. “Sniff! Smell! Trail! Show me the way! And I, thy master, shall be grateful to thee and shall reward thee with the aroma of whatever rich food may tickle my palate and bloat this shriveled belly of mine!”

So the nose sniffed and led the way; and Ahmed followed, across the Square of the One-

Eyed Jew, through the packed wilderness of small Arab houses that ran together like children at play, with a glimpse at the sky above the roof tops revealing scarcely three yards of breadth, the copings meeting at times, and the bulbous, fantastic balconies seeming to interlace like the outrigging of sailing craft in a Malay harbor; until finally, at a place where the alleys broadened into another Square, the nostrils quivered and the nose dilated, causing the owner of the nose to stop and stand still, like a pointer at bay.

A delicious, seductive odor was wafted from somewhere: rice cooked with honey and rose buds and green pistache nuts and drowned in a generous flood of clarified butter; meat balls spiced with saffron and poppy seeds; egg plants cleverly stuffed with raisins and with secret condiments from the Island of the Seven Purple Cranes.

Ahmed looked in the direction where the nose sniffed.

And there, balanced on the railing of a bird's-nest balcony high up on the wall of a Pasha's proud palace, he saw three great porce-

lain bowls, heaped with steaming food, that a fat Nubian cook had put there to cool a little.

He looked at the wall. It was steep, high, straight up and down, with never a foothold of any sort. A cat in climbing, he was. But to reach this balcony he needed wings, and—he laughed—"I am not a bird, and may Allah grant it be many years before I become an angel!"

And then, brushing through the deserted Square, he heard two noises blending into a symphony: a man's staccato snore and a monkey's melancholy, pessimistic bray. He looked about, and, a little to the left, he saw an enormous Tartar peddler—well over three hundred pounds he must have weighed—asleep in the sun, sitting cross-legged on huge haunches, his extravagant stomach resting and overlapping on his stout knees, his great, turbaned head bobbing up and down, snoring loudly through half-open lips, while, a few feet away, a tiny white donkey, the fruit-panniers empty but for three spoiled melons and roped to the wooden pack-saddle, was braying at the sky, doubtless complaining of its boredom.

“A pulley!” thought Ahmed. “Sent by Allah Himself to help me up to yonder balcony!”

A few moments later he had unwound the turban cloth from about the Tartar’s head, weighted it with a melon, flung one end over the balcony railing, and, when it came back to his hands, tucked it deftly under the sleeping man’s knees, then tied it to the donkey’s saddle.

“Up, little donkey!” he called softly, “Up, little brother, and back to thy stable—the rich, green food! Up!”

And the donkey, nothing loath, ambled sturdily on its way; the Tartar, with the turban cloth tugging at his knees, awakened, saw the donkey trotting away, and waddled after it with loud shouts of: “Hey, there! Wait a moment, Long-Ears!” And thus, clinging to the turban cloth as if it were a rope, ambling donkey and waddling peddler serving as a pulley, Ahmed was drawn up to the balcony in triumph and comfort, and lost no time in helping himself to food, stuffing his mouth with large, greedy, well-spiced handfuls.

He had not been there very long when a commotion caused him to look down. Around the

corner, surrounded by a crowd of men and women and children, he saw an Indian sorcerer swinging with a majestic stride. The man was immensely tall, emaciated, bearded, and naked but for a scarlet loin-cloth. By his side tripped a young boy, while two attendants followed, one carrying a grass-woven basket and a bundle of swords, the other a coiled rope.

Arrived just below the balcony, the Hindu stopped and addressed the crowd.

“Moslems,” he said, “permit me to introduce myself. I am,” he announced without the slightest diffidence, “Vikramavata, the Swami, the Yogi, the greatest miracle-worker out of Hindustan! There is none in the Seven Known Worlds who approaches me in the mastery of either white or black magic! I am a vast sea of most excellent qualities! I am—so I have been assured by truth-telling and disinterested persons in China and Tartary and the lands of the dog-faced Mongols—a jewel of pure gold, a handful of powdered rubies, an exquisite tonic for the human brain, the father and mother of hidden wisdom!” He motioned to his attendants who put basket, swords, and

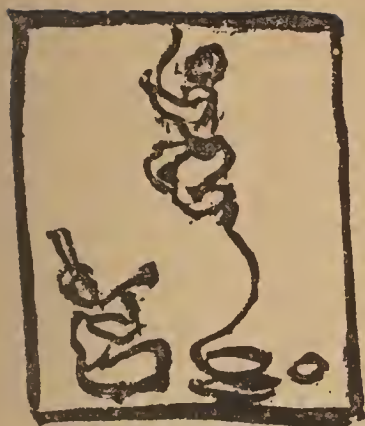
rope on the ground, and went on: "If you like my sorcery, stay not the generosity of your hands! For"—in flat and shameless contradiction to his previous statement—"I am but a poor and humble man, with seven wives and seven times seventeen children, all clamoring for food!"

He bent; opened the basket.

"Ho!" he shouted at the young boy who thereupon jumped into the basket, where he curled up like a kitten. The Hindu closed it, picked up the swords and thrust them through every part of the basket with all his strength, while the crowd looked on, utterly fascinated.

Up on the balcony Ahmed, too, watched. He was pleased more than ever with himself and the world at large. Why, he had money, a few choice jewels, an abundance of food—here he helped himself to another liberal fistful—and now a show: all free of charge, all for the asking and taking!

"*Hayah!*" he said to himself, sitting on the balcony rail and chewing luxuriously, "life is pleasant—and he who works and strives is a fool!"



CHAPTER II



CHAPTER II

Down in the Square the Hindu continued his sorceries.

He put a dry mango seed on the ground for all the world to see. Thrice he passed his hand over it, murmuring mysterious Indian words:

*“Bhut, pret, pisach, dana,
Chee mantar, sab nikal jana,
Mane, mane, Shivka khahna. . . .”*

and the mango seed burst—it grew—it shot in the air—in bloom—in fruit. Again he waves his hand and—behold!—the mango was gone.

He asked the boy to approach. He whispered a secret word and, suddenly, a glistening Khyberee sword flashed in his right hand. He lifted it high above his head. He struck with all his might. And the boy’s head rolled on

the ground; blood squirted; while the onlookers were aghast, sucking in their breath like little lisping babes in the dark. Then he waves his hands again, and there was the boy, his head on his neck where it belonged, a smile on his lips.

So trick followed trick while the crowd applauded and shuddered and laughed and chattered and wondered, until finally the Hindu announced the greatest of all his tricks: the trick of the magic rope.

“A rope,” he explained, uncoiling it and whizzing it through the air with a sharp noise, “woven from the hair of a purple-faced witch of the left-handed sect! Never in all the world was there such a rope! Look, O Moslems!”

Swish!—he threw the rope into the air, straight up, and it remained there standing, without support, erect, lithe, like a slim tree, its upper end parallel with the balcony rail and directly in front of Ahmed’s eyes, who could hardly control his itching palms.

Why—he thought—to possess this magic rope! What a help for the Thief of Bagdad!

The Hindu clapped his hands.

"Hayah! Ho! Jao!" he yelled; and suddenly the boy disappeared, vanished into the nowhere, while the spectators gaped with open mouths.

"Hayah! Ho! Jao!" the sorcerer repeated; and a quivering shout of awed wonder rose from the crowd as they saw there, high up on the rope, come out of the nowhere into which he had disappeared, the boy clinging like a monkey. The next moment he had slid down and was going the round of the audience, asking for bakshish that was contributed generously; and even Ahmed was on the point of obeying the impulse and had already reached into his baggy trousers for a coin, when a throaty, guttural cry of rage caused him to turn quickly. There, like a plum-colored, obese goddess of wrath, stood the Nubian cook who had come from the interior of the palace. She saw the bowls of food; saw that impious hands had toyed with their contents; saw the munching, chewing Ahmed; and, putting two and two together, went for him, brandishing her heavy iron stirring ladle like a Sarazene battle ax.

Ahmed considered and acted at the same fraction of a second. He launched himself away from the balcony railing; leaped straight at the magic rope; clutched it; and so there he was, swinging in mid-air, the cook calling down imprecations from above, the Hindu echoing them from below. And be it mentioned—in Ahmed's favor or to his shame, exactly as you prefer—that he replied to both, impartially, vituperatively, enthusiastically, insult for insult and curse for curse.

"Come back here, O Son of a noseless Mother, and pay for what you stole!" yelled the cook.

"Come down here, O Camel-Spawn, and be grievously beaten!" demanded the sorcerer.

"I shall do neither!" laughed the Thief of Bagdad. "It is airy up here and pleasant and most exclusive! Here I am, and here I shall remain!"

But he did not.

For at last the Hindu lost his patience. He made another magic pass, whispered another secret word, and the rope gave, bent, flicked from side to side, shot down to the ground,

and sent Ahmed sprawling. Almost immediately he was up again, his agile fingers clutching at the rope. But the Hindu's hand was as quick as Ahmed's, and so they stood there, tugging at the rope, with the crowd looking on and laughing, when suddenly from the distance, where a Mosque peaked its minaret of rosy stone overlaid half way up with a faience tiling of dusky, peacock-green sheen, a muezzin's voice drifted out, chanting the call to mid-day prayer, stilling the tumult:

“Es salat wah es-salaam aleyk, yah aurwel khulk Illah wah khatimat russul Illah— peace be with Thee and the glory, O first-born of the creatures of God, and seal of the apostles of God! Hie ye to devotion! Hie ye to salvation! Prayer is better than sleep! Prayer is better than food! Bless ye God and the Prophet! Come, all ye faithful!”

“Wah khatimat russul Illah——” mumbled the crowd, turning in the direction of Mecca.

They prostrated themselves, touching the ground with palms and foreheads. The Hindu joined them, chanting fervently. So did Ahmed, though not so fervently. Indeed

while, mechanically, automatically, he bowed toward the East and while his lips formed the words of the prayer, his roaming, lawless eyes noticed the magic rope, between him and the Hindu. The latter, occupied with his devotions, was paying no attention to it. A moment later, watching his chance, Ahmed had picked it up and was away, fleet-footedly, across the bent backs of the worshipers. He ran at a good clip through the wilderness of little Arab houses. He increased his speed when, not long afterwards, he heard in the distance the view-halloo of the man-chase as the Hindu, rising from his devotions, noticed that his precious rope had been stolen.

“Thief! Thief! Catch thief!” the shout rose, bloated, stabbed, spread.

He ran as fast as he could. But his pursuers gained on him steadily, and he felt afraid. Only the day before he had watched a thief being beaten in public with cruel rhinoceros-hide whips that had torn the man’s back to crimson shreds. He shuddered at the recollection. He ran till his lungs were at the

bursting point, his knees ready to give way under him.

He had turned the corner of the Street of the Mutton-Butchers when his pursuers came in sight. They saw him.

“Thief! Thief!” the shouts echoed and reverberated, sharp, grim, ominous, freezing the marrow in his bones.

Where could he turn? Where hide himself? And then he saw, directly in front of him, an immense building; saw above him, thirty feet up, the invitation of an open window. How reach it? Hopeless! But, the next moment, he remembered his magic rope. He spoke the secret word. And the rope uncoiled, whizzed, stood straight like a lance at rest, and up he went hand over hand.

He reached the window, climbed in, drew the rope after him.

The house was deserted. He sped through empty rooms and corridors; came out on the roof and crossed it; leaped to a second roof and crossed that; a third; a fourth; until at last, slipping through a trap door, he found himself—for the first time in his unhallowed ex-

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istence—in a Mosque of Allah, up on the ceiling rafters.

Inside, below him, a tall, gentle-eyed, green-turbaned Moslem priest was addressing a small gathering of devotees.

“There is prayer to Allah in everything,” he said, “in the buzzing of the insects, the scent of flowers, the lowing of cattle, the sighing of the breeze. But there is no prayer to be compared to the prayer of a man’s honest, plucky work. Such prayer means happiness. Honest, courageous, fearless work means the greatest happiness on earth!”

A sentiment the opposite of Ahmed’s philosophy of life.

“You lie, O priest!” he shouted from the rafters; and he slid down and faced the Holy Man with impudent eyes and arrogant gestures.

There was an angry growling, as of wild animals, among the devotees. Fists were raised to smash that blasphemous mouth. But the priest raised calm hands. He smiled upon Ahmed as he might upon a babbling child.

“You are—ah—quite sure, my friend?” he

asked with gentle irony. "You know, belike, a better prayer, a greater happiness than honest, courageous work?"

"I do!" replied Ahmed. For a fleeting moment he felt embarrassed beneath the other's steady gaze. The shadow of an uneasy premonition crept over his soul. Something akin to awe, to fear, touched his spine with clay-cold hands, and he was ashamed of this feeling of fear; spoke the more arrogantly and loudly to hide this fear from himself: "I have a different creed! What I want, I take! My reward is here, on earth! Paradise is a fool's dream, and Allah is nothing but a myth!"

Again the angry worshippers surged toward him. Again the Holy Man held them back with a gesture of his lean hands. He called after Ahmed, who was about to leave the Mosque.

"I shall be here, little brother," he said, "and waiting for you—in case you need my help—the help of my faith in God and the Prophet!"

"*I—need you?*" mocked Ahmed. "Never, priest! *Hayah!* Can a frog catch cold?"

And, with a ringing laugh, he was out of the Mosque.

Ten minutes later, he reached the dwelling place which he shared with Hassan el-Toork, nicknamed Bird-of-Evil, his pal and partner. A snug, cosy, secret little dwelling it was, in the bottom of an abandoned well, and there he spread his loot before the other's delighted eyes.

"I love you, my little butter-ball, my little sprig of sweet-scented sassafras!" mumbled Bird-of-Evil, caressing Ahmed's cheek with his clawlike old hands. "Never was there as clever a thief as you! You could steal food from between my lips, and my belly would be none the wiser! Gold—Jewels—purses . . ." he toyed with the loot—"and this magic rope! Why, in the future there will be no wall too high for us, no roof too steep, and . . ." he slurred, interrupted himself as—for the abandoned well was only a stone's throw from Bagdad's outer gate—a loud voice called to the warden to open it:

"Open wide the gates of Bagdad! We are porters bringing precious things for the adorn-

ment of the Palace! For tomorrow suitors come to woo our royal Princess!”

The Caliph in those days was Shirzad Kemal-ud-Dowlah, twelfth and greatest of the glorious Ghaznavide dynasty. Lord he was from Bagdad to Stambul, and from Mecca to Jerusalem. His pride was immense, and, beside his Arabic title of Caliph, he gloried in such splendid Turkish titles as: Imam-ul-Muslemin—Pontiff of all Moslems; Alem Penah—Refuge of the World; Hunkiar—Man-Slayer; Ali-Osman Padishahi—King of the Descendants of Osman; Shahin Shahi Alem—King of the Sovereigns of the Universe; Hudavendighar—Attached to God; Shahin Shahi Movazem ve-Hillulah—High King of Kings and shadow of God upon Earth.

Zobeid was his daughter, his only child, and heir to his great kingdom.

As to Zobeid's beauty and charm and surpassing witchery, there have come down to us, through the grey, swinging centuries, a baker's dozen of reports. To believe them all one

would have to conclude that, compared to her, Helen of Troy for the sake of whose face a thousand ships were launched, was only an ugly duckling. We choose therefore, with full deliberation, the simplest and least florid of these contemporary accounts, as contained in the letter of a certain Abu'l Hamed el-Andalusi, an Arab poet who, visiting for reasons of his own a young Circassian slave girl in the Caliph's harem, happened to glance through a slit in the brocaded curtain which separated the slave's room from the apartment of the Princess, and saw her there. He wrote his impressions to a brother-poet in Damascus; wrote as follows:

“Her face is as wondrous as the moon on the fourteenth day; her black locks are female cobras; her waist is the waist of the she-lion; her eyes are violets drenched in dew; her mouth is like a crimson sword wound; her skin is like the sweetly scented champaka flower; her narrow feet are twin lilies.”

The letter continues with slight Oriental exaggeration that Zobeid was the Light of the writer's Eyes, the Soul of his Soul, the Breath

of his Nostrils, and—than which there is no praise more ardent in the Arabic language—the Blood of his Liver; it mentions such rather personal items that the Circassian slave girl when she saw the desire eddy up in the poet's eyes, was for scratching them out on the spot; and comes down to earth again by saying:

“Never in all the seven worlds of Allah's creation lived there a woman to touch the shadow of Zobeid's feet. Brother mine!—as a garment she is white and gold; as a season, the spring; as a flower, the Persian jasmine; as a speaker, the nightingale, as a perfume, musk blended with amber and sandalwood; as a being, love incarnate”

So the letter, today yellow and brittle and pathetic with age, goes on for several pages. Small wonder, therefore, that throughout the Orient Zobeid's fame spread like powder under spark, and that there were many suitors for her small, pretty hand—not to mention the great kingdom which she would inherit on her father's death—and chiefly Asia's three mightiest monarchs.

The first of these was Cham Sheng, Prince

of the Mongols, King of Ho Sho, Governor of Wah Hoo and the sacred Island of Wak, Khan of the golden Horde, Khan of the Silver Horde, who traced his descent in a straight line back to Gengiz Khan, the great conqueror out of the Central Asian plains, and who had brought under his spurred heel all the North and East, from Lake Baikal to Peking, from the frozen Arctic tundras to the moist, malarial warmth of Tonkin's rice paddies.

The second was Khalaf Mansur Nasir-ud-din Nadir Khan Kuli Khan Durani, Prince and King of Persia, Shah-in-Shah of Khorassan and Azerbaian, Khan of the Kizilbashis and Outer Tartars, Chief of the Shia Moslems, Ever-Victorious Lion of Allah, Conqueror of Russia and of Germany as far as the Oder, Warrior for the Faith of Islam, Attabeg over all the Cossacks, and descendant of the Prophet Mohammed.

The third was Bhartari-hari Vijramukut, Prince of Hindustan and the South from the Himalayas to Cape Comorin, descendant of Ganesha, the elephant-headed God of Wisdom, on his father's side and on his mother's—

slightly more modestly—descendant of an illegitimate union between the Flame and the Moon.

All three were due to arrive in Bagdad on the morrow; so the slaves and servants and majordomos and eunuchs of the Caliph's palace were hustling and bustling and yelling and rushing about and perspiring and swearing and appealing to Allah in a fever of preparations for the princely visitors; and loud was the clamoring at Bagdad's outer gate:

"Open up! Open up, O Warden of the Walls! We are porters bringing rare food and rarer wines for tomorrow's feasting!"

Ahmed heard the tumult and turned to Bird-of-Evil.

"Come, O ancient and malodorous parrot of my heart!" he said, climbing up the rope ladder that led to the mouth of the abandoned well.

"Where to?"

"To the palace!"

"The palace?"

"Yes," replied the Thief of Bagdad. "Often

and greatly have I desired to see it—from the inside. I wager there is loot in there worthy of my agile fingers and cunning brain.”

“Doubtless! But they will not let you in!”

“They may!”

“How?”

“I have an idea, Bird-of-Evil!” And, when the other commenced asking and arguing: “I have no time to explain now. Come. And don’t forget your black camel’s-hair cloak.”

“It is not cold today.”

“I know. But we shall need the cloak.”

“Why?”

“Wait and see, O son of an impatient father.”

They were out of the well, ran down the street, and just beyond the corner caught up with the tail-end of the procession of porters that moved through the broad, tree-lined avenue toward the Caliph’s palace. There were hundreds and hundreds of them. Most of them were gigantic, plum-colored, frizzy, tattooed Central Africian slaves, and they stepped along with the tireless lope, the swaying hips and long body-pull of their jungly breed, balancing bundles and bales and baskets and jars on their

kinky polls, with Arab overseers trotting on either side and driving on the lagging with knotted, rawhide whips. At the end of the avenue, surrounded by a huge garden ablaze with flowers, the palace closed the vista like an enormous seal of marble and granite. Rising high in even tiers, curving inward like a bay of darkness dammed by the stony sweep of the crenellated, wing-like battlements, soaring North and South into two cube-shaped granite towers, topped by a forest of turrets and spires and domes, it descended beyond the horizon in a bold avalanche of square-clouted, fantastically painted masonry. The frontal gateway was covered by a door—rather a diphamous, but strong, almost unbreakable net—of closely woven iron-and-silver chains, that rattled down into a groove as the captain of the gate wardens saw the porters approaching and motioned to his armed, turbaned assistants.

The porters passed in singly and by twos and threes. The last was a tall negro who carried an earthen jar filled with golden, flower-scented Shiraz wine. But—wait!—here came still another porter. Not a negro he, but a lithe

young Arab, naked to the waist, his legs covered by silken, baggy breeches, and balancing on his head a squat bundle that was hidden by a black camel's-hair cloak.

Just as the man was about to cross the threshold, the captain's narrow eyes contracted into slits. Quickly he motioned to his assistants who raised the chain door.

"Let me in!" demanded the young porter.
"Let me in!"

"No, no!" laughed the red-bearded, pot-bellied captain. "No, no, my clever bazar hound!"

"Let me in!" repeated the other. "Let me in, O gross mountain of pig's flesh. I am bringing a hundred-weight of precious Bokhara grapes for the morrow's feasting!"

Again the captain laughed.

"Soul of my soul," he said, "these grapes of yours are curious grapes! Behold! They move—as if they were alive! *Hayah! Hayah!*"—raising his lance and pricking the bundle which thereupon squirmed, squeaked, squealed loudly—"a bunch of grapes with a human voice!"

Precious grapes, indeed! Most wondrous and unique grapes of Allah's creation!"

"Pah!" The Thief of Bagdad spat disgustedly. He let drop the bundle which, the camel's-hair cloak dropping away, disclosed Bird-of-Evil, vigorously rubbing his haunches where they had struck the pavement and wailing noisily.

"My darling," continued the captain, nor unkindly, "the Caliph's palace is not a healthy place for robbers."

"How dare you"

"I can see it in your eyes," the other interrupted. "They are humorous eyes—yes! Likable eyes—yes, yes! But not honest eyes! And so——" came the cryptic warning—"be pleased to consider the fate of the donkey?"

"What donkey, O swag-bellied ruffian?"

"The donkey who traveled abroad looking for horns—and lost its ears! Beware, my friend! All day the place is watched by the Caliph's soldiers. And all night—look!"—he pointed through the iron mesh of the door—"do you see these traps, these grooves and grottoes and cages? They contain the warden's

of the night: man-eating striped tigers from Bengal, black-maned Nubian lions, and long-armed, dog-toothed gorillas from the far forests! Take heed, my clever bazar hound!"

"It was your fault, Bird-of-Evil!" Ahmed turned to his friend when the captain had walked away. "Why did you move just as I was crossing the threshold?"

"I could not help it! A flea bit me!"

"And now a mule will kick you!" Ahmed raised his right foot.

Bird-of-Evil squirmed rapidly away.

"Wait! Wait!" he implored. "Wait until tonight! Then we shall climb the walls!"

"Impossible, fool! They are too steep!"

"You forget the magic rope!"

"Right—by the Prophet's toe-nails!"

And so when night came, closing in overhead like an opaque dome of dark-green jade encrusted with a shimmering net of stars, dropping over sleeping Bagdad with a brown, clogging pall of silence, Ahmed and Bird-of-Evil went quietly on their way, the magic rope coiled about the former's left arm. They reached the palace. It stabbed up to the sky's dark tent

with fantastic, purple outlines pierced here and there, where the slaves were still about some late duty, by glittering pencils of light. They stopped in the shadow-blotch of the outer wall that, at a height of twenty-odd feet, was crowned with an elaborate balustrade of carved, fretted, pink marble. They waited; listened, sucking in their breath. They could hear a captain of the night watch going the rounds, the steady tramp-tramp-tramp of his booted feet, a faint crackling of steel, the swish of his curved sabre scraping across stone flags. The sounds died away. Came other sounds—the voices of the savage beasts that guarded the palace, prowling and slinking about the garden: the vibrant growl of the lions beginning in a deep basso and ending in a shrill, stabbing treble; the angry hissing and spitting, as of enormous cats, of the great, ruddy Bengal tigers; the chirp and whistle—ludicrously in contrast to their size—of the long-armed gorillas.

Ahmed uncoiled his rope.

“Can you make it?” whispered Bird-of-Evil.

“Easily.”

“But—the lions and tigers?”

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"Beyond the outerwall—I noticed it this afternoon—at a distance of a few feet is a second wall, a broad ledge with a door set in. Once on top of the outer wall, I can leap across to the ledge and fool those jungly pets. Then through the door and—for the rest—I shall rely on my nose, my fingers, and my luck."

"May Allah the One protect you!" mumbled Bird-of-Evil piously.

"Allah? Bah!" sneered the Thief of Bagdad. "It is mine own strength and cleverness that will protect me! Wait down here, O ancient goat of my soul. Within the hour I shall be back with a king's ransom tucked away in my breeches."

He tossed the rope into the air. He spoke the secret word. The rope obeyed. It stood straight. A minute later, climbing hand over hand, Ahmed was on top of the outer wall. He looked down into the flat, emerald-green eyes of a tiger that crouched below, swishing its tail from side to side and doubtless thinking that here was a late supper provided by Fate itself. Then, measuring the distance to the ledge with his eyes, he fooled both tiger and Fate by leap-

ing across, neatly, lithely, and safely. He opened the door that gave unto the ledge; and found himself in an empty hall. So, softly, warily, on naked, silent feet, he walked on through rooms and rooms and again rooms. All were empty of life. Some of them, beneath swinging ceiling lamps, lay ablaze with raw, clashing colors, others were in dull, somber shades which melted into each other; on, through corridors supported by pillars whose capitals were shaped into pendant lotus forms or crowned with fantastic, lateral struts carved into the likeness of horsemen or war-girt elephants.

Finally he came to a great, oblong room. There was no furniture here except a tall incense burner on a twisted gold stand giving out spirals of scented, opalescent smoke, a number of large, iron-bound chests and boxes, and a profusion of silken pillows where three enormous palace eunuchs, dressed in yellow gauze that gave a generous glimpse of the brown flesh beneath, were snoring loud enough to rouse the dead.

“By the itching of his palms as well as by the

sight of the boxes, the Thief of Bagdad knew that he had arrived in the Caliph's treasure chamber. And, while the three eunuchs continued to sleep the sleep of both the just and the unjust, he crept over to one of the chests; found it locked; found, furthermore, that the key to it was fastened so tightly to one of the eunuchs' waist shawls that it was impossible to remove it; then, softly, slowly, inch by inch, he slid the chest along the floor until, without waking the sleeper, he was able to lift the key to the lock.

He turned it. The lock opened. He raised the lid; looked; suppressed a cry of pleasurable excitement.

For there, in a shimmering heap, were jewels from all the corners of Asia: jasper from the Punjaub, rubies from Burma, turquoises from Thibet, star-sapphires and alexandrites from Ceylon, flawless emeralds from Afghanistan, purple amethysts from Tartary, white crystal from Malwa, onyx from Persia, green jade and white jade from Amoy and from Turkestan, garnets from Bundelkhand, red corals from

Socotra, pearls from Ramesvaram, lapis lazuli from Jaffra, yellow diamonds from Poonah, pink diamonds from Hyderabad, violet diamonds from Kafiristan, black, fire-veined agate from Dynbulpore.

“If my breeches were only large enough to hold them all!” thought the Thief of Bagdad. “What shall I take first?”

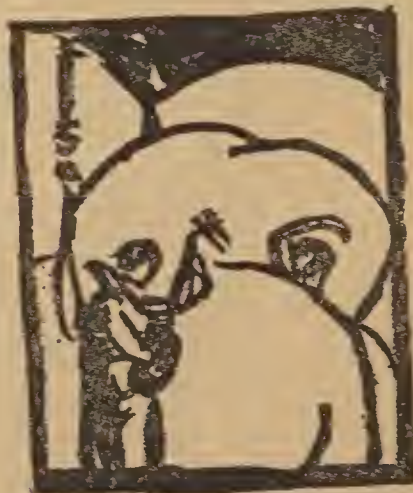
And he had just decided to start with a gorgeous string of evenly matched black pearls, had it already in his hand, when suddenly he sat up and listened. For, from not very far away, he heard the plaintive, minor cadences of a one-stringed Mongol lute; heard a high, soft voice lilting a Mongol song:

*“In the pagoda of exquisite purity
I hear each day the tinkle-tinkle
Of my lost love’s jade girdle gems.
Looking from the carved, broad window
Of the pagoda of exquisite purity,
I see the unsullied waters of my grief
Flow on in bleak undulation.
I see a stray cloud of my Mongol home land*

*Above the spire of the pagoda of exquisite
purity,
And the wild geese of Tartary flying over the
river dunes”*



CHAPTER III



CHAPTER III

“And the wild geese of Tartary flying over the river dunes . . .” the voice quivered, light as thistledown.

It was the voice of Fount-in-the-Forest who had been captured in battle seven years ago beneath the steel-shod tusks of the war elephants when the Caliph of Bagdad had gone into the East to fight the growing menace of the Khan of the Middle Horde. Daughter of a Mongol Prince, Fount-in-the-Forest had never forgotten the steppes and snow-clad mountains of her far country; had always hated this Western land of Islam with a smoldering, undying passion. She was attached to the personal service of the Princess Zobeid; and it was her duty, each night, to play and sing until her mistress fell asleep.

So tonight.

Her voice quivered on:

*“In the pagoda of exquisite purity,
My thoughts roam—*

*Roam out beyond the Jewel Gate
Pass . . .”*

She cut off her song on a high note, in mid-air. She looked at the Princess who lay on a canopied couch; turned to Zemzem, another slave girl, an Arab entirely devoted to her mistress; put a finger to her lips.

“The Heaven-Born sleeps,” she whispered; and the two slaves stepped softly from the apartment, the sounds of lute and song growing fainter and fainter:

*“Looking from the carved, broad window
Of the pagoda of exquisite purity,
In vain do I seek for the outlines of the
White Jade House”*

The trembling cadences receded and Ahmed rose, the string of pearls in his hand.

“Charming!” he thought, for he had a pretty taste in music. “Let us see if I, the Thief of Bagdad, am thief enough to steal a look at the singer!”

He left the hall. He leaped up a flight of



The Mongolian slave girl discovered the trick of the propped dagger.
(*"The Thief of Bagdad."*)

stairs, side-stepping a huge Nubian watchman who was squatting on one of the steps, fast asleep, his ape-like arms crossed about the grip of his two-handed sword; he followed the sound of the music until he reached another staircase that swept down into an oblong room in an audacious curve of glistening, olive-veined marble; and, bending over the baluster, saw there, veiled by the thin silk of the canopy, the slumbering Zobeid.

Was it his fickleness? Or was it a sending of Kismet, of Fate?

The ancient Arabic records which have brought down to us the tale of the Thief of Bagdad, are silent on the point. But they do tell us that, at that moment, at once, immediately and completely, Ahmed forgot the singer in whose quest he had left the treasure chamber; saw only the sleeping Princess; thought only of her. That flower-like little face down there, on the silken pillow, drew him like a magnet. He vaulted over the baluster; landed on his feet, softly, with a plop like a great cat; crossed over to the couch; looked at Zobeid; listened to

her gentle breathing; and felt a new sensation, a strange sensation, a sensation that was sweet with a great longing yet gall-bitter with a great pain, tugging at his heart strings.

“Love at first sight,” the ancient records call it laconically.

But whatever it was, love at first sight or love at second sight—and he did look a second time, looked long, looked ardently, could not turn his eyes away—it was to him as if, suddenly, they were alone, she and he, alone in the palace, alone in Bagdad, alone in all the world. The canopy which peaked above the couch seemed charged to the brim with some overpowering loveliness of wild and simple things, like the beauty of stars and wind and flowers, with something which all his life subconsciously his heart seemed to have craved in vain, compared to which his life of yesterday was only a drab, wretched, useless dream.

Hardly knowing what he was doing and why, he crouched by the side of the couch. Hardly knowing what he was doing and why, carelessly dropping the necklace for the sake of which he had risked so many dangers, he picked

up one of the Princess' tiny, embroidered slippers. He pressed it to his lips.

The next moment Zobeid stirred slightly in her sleep. One narrow, white hand slipped over the edge of the couch.

The Thief of Bagdad smiled. Obeying a mad, irresistible impulse, he bent over the little hand.

He kissed it. Kissed it so gently. Not gently enough. For the Princess awakened. She gave a startled cry. She sat up, flinging the silken, padded coverlet aside. Quickly Ahmed dropped to the ground; and it was his luck that the coverlet fell over him, swathing him in its heavy folds, hiding him completely from the Princess' sight; from the sight, too, of the slave girls who came running at their mistress' outcry, and of the eunuchs and the Nubian watchman who rushed in, curved sabres poised in brawny fists, searching for the miscreant.

They looked all about the room, finding nothing, while Ahmed crouched beneath the coverlet, motionless, sucking in his breath.

"The Heaven-Born must have dreamt it," said the Mongol slave girl to the Princess who

insisted that somebody had touched her hand, and she persuaded her finally to close her eyes again. But the chief eunuch whispered to the Nubian that, indeed, a robber must have entered the palace since one of the treasure chests had been opened; and so the three eunuchs, the Nubian, and the Arab slave girl went to make a thorough search of the other rooms in this part of the harem, while Fount-in-the-Forest remained behind, once more singing her plaintive Mongol song:

*“In the pagoda of exquisite purity
My heart sighs—sighs for the bright moon
Above the Tartar steppes”*

until, gradually, Zobeid fell asleep again.

Fount-in-the-Forest stooped to pick up the coverlet. Then, suddenly, she became frozen into frightened immobility, swallowed the cry that bubbled to her lips when a brown fist, armed with a dagger, jerked out from the silken folds, and a low voice whispered warning:

“Keep quiet, little sister! Turn your back! Gently—gently does it!” as, the dagger pricking her skin, she obeyed, turning on her

heel and facing the other way. "And now—walk slowly! Toward the door over yonder! Do not turn and look! Gently! Gently! This knife of mine is thirsty for young blood!"

She was helpless. Propelled by the pricking, tickling dagger, she preceded Ahmed to a narrow door set into the farther wall. With the help of a small cushion that he had picked up on the way he propped the hilt of the dagger against the door jamb and quickly withdrew his hand so that the point of the weapon still remained resting lightly against the slave girl's bare, smooth skin. She was not aware of the trick, and stayed rigid and motionless, while he turned softly, to make his escape. But before he left the room he decided that he would take one more look at the sleeping Princess. He hurried back to the couch. He stared at Zobeid who was slumbering peacefully. He felt again love sweeping through his soul as with the mighty whirring of wings; and he bent . . . when, suddenly—"Hai!"—a stifled scream warned him, brought him up standing, made him turn.

"Hai! Hai!"

Again the scream. For Fount-in-the-Forest had discovered the trick of the propped dagger. She was yelling for help. Already, from the next room, came hurrying footsteps, clamoring voices.

The Thief of Bagdad laughed. He picked up Zobeid's little slipper. He left behind him magic rope and pearl necklace. He ran toward the window; leaped through; landed in a tree not far from the garden wall. The tree curved beneath his weight, and, using it like a catapult, he launched himself across the wall and dropped to the ground on the street outside, a short distance from the place where Bird-of-Evil was waiting for him.

"Ah!" exclaimed the latter, excitedly. What loot did you bring? Pearls? Diamonds? Red, red rubies?"

"No," replied the Thief of Bagdad. "I found a far greater treasure! More precious than all the jewels in the world!"

"Show it to me!"

"I cannot!"

"Why not? Where is it?"

"It is here!" replied the Thief of Bagdad,

holding high the little slipper. "It is here!" he continued, touching his forehead. "It is here!" he wound up, putting his hand on his heart.

And, refusing to say more, Ahmed stalked off into the fantastic, purple night, while Bird-of-Evil followed him, puzzled, perplexed, speculating, trying to read the riddle of the other's words.

"It is here?" he echoed. "And here? And here? But—where—where—where . . . by Beelzebub, Father of Lies and Fleas?"

They reached the abandoned well.

"Where—where? Tell me—where is it?" he repeated.

Ahmed did not reply. He lay on his couch, unable to find sleep, staring into the void, silent, brooding, morose; and, silent, brooding, morose, he lay on the ledge near the fountain on the Square of the One-Eyed Jew the next morning, hardly noticing the festive crowds that thronged the streets of Bagdad the Golden to welcome the three great Princes who came today as suitors for Zobeid's hand.

There, seeing his friend day-dreaming, regardless of the loot that might be his for a twisting and tugging of his agile fingers, all at once the answer to the riddle came to Bird-of-Evil.

"It is here—and here—and here!" he laughed. He addressed Ahmed. "Tell me—are you in love?"

"I am!" admitted Ahmed. "Hopelessly!"

"Hopelessly . . . ?"

"Yes!"

"Why? Who is she? Is she Ayesha, the daughter of the rich saddle-maker? Or Fathma, first-born of the Syrian goldsmith? Or is she belike . . . ? *Wah!*" Bird-of-Evil interrupted himself. "Just tell me her name. I myself shall be the marriage broker. I am a clever hand at that sort of thing. Well—who is she?"

"She is Zobeid, the daughter of the Caliph! Allah——" Ahmed sighed. "She is unobtainable—like flowers of air!"

"Nothing in the world is unobtainable," said the other, who loved the younger man dearly, deep in his gnarled old heart.

"You cannot catch the winds of heaven with your bare hands! You cannot fish for the moon reflected in the water!"

"And why not? A Princess, is she? What of it? Once upon a time a Princess was carried off under the very nose of her father, the great Caliph Haroun el-Rashid."

"How was it done?" demanded Ahmed.

"With the help of a subtle Egyptian drug. Eat the drug. Drink it. Or simply smell it. It will put you to sleep—will make you helpless. I shall get you the drug. Today. Immediately. And then we shall enter the palace . . ."

"Enter the palace? How?" asked the Thief of Bagdad.

"*Ahee!*" laughed Bird-of-Evil. "Why does love render its victims so helpless, so foolish, so utterly silly?" He was silent as from the distance came the loud rubbing and thumping of silver kettle drums and the bull-like roar of long-stemmed trumpets. "Listen to the drums," he went on. "The heralds are announcing the arrival of the princely suitors at the city gates. Come! We have little time to

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lose.” He took Ahmed by the arm and ran with him across the Square. “I shall go and procure the drug. Do you in the meantime go to the Bazar of the Persian Silk-Weavers and see if your hands are less dreamy and useless than your head. For we need costly raiment. Embroidered cloaks! Gold-threaded slippers of state! Gorgeous turban clothes! A few handsome jewels! Some fine weapons! And—before I forget it—go to the caravanserai of the Tartar traders! Get us a horse—and a donkey . . .”

“What for—what for?” demanded Ahmed.

“To attain the impossible! Flowers of air; ropes of tortoise hair; horns upon a cat; and—the hand of the Princess Zobeid! Hurry—hurry! And meet me, within the hour, at the Gate of Lions!”

And they ran off while—*bang! bannng! bannnnng!*—thumped the distant kettle drums, while the Princes of Asia rode through the crowded streets of Bagdad, and while Zobeid watched from behind her screened window.

Early that morning, while Fount-in-the-

Forest had slipped from the apartment upon a devious and gliding purpose of her own, Zobeid had called to Zemzem, her faithful Arab slave.

“Zemzem!” the Princess had said. “I am afraid of the future. Allah! Allah! What does the future hold for me?”

“Ask Therrya, the Bedawin fortune-teller,” Zemzem had suggested. “She will read the tale of your Fate in the shifting sands.”

They had sent for Therrya, who had come, had squatted down, had heaped a handful of Meccan sand on a porcelain tray and—by this time Fount-in-the-Forest had returned from her mysterious errand and was watching tensely—had blown upon it until, slowly, gradually, the golden sand grains had taken on the hazy outlines of a rose.

“Heaven-Born!” the fortune-teller had said. “The signs are clear. Whoever of your suitors will be the first to touch the rose tree in your garden—the great, crimson rose tree just below your window—him Allah the All-Powerful has destined to be your husband!”

And now, as the gates opened to admit the

three Princes, Zobeid's eyes glanced anxiously at the rose tree—the rose tree that spelled her Fate—the rose tree below her window that was straight in the path down which her suitors had to come on their way from the outer gate to the broad entrance door of the palace itself.

There was a loud bellowing and roaring and trumpeting as a huge white elephant ambled through the gate, carrying upon its back, sitting cross-legged in a golden *howdah*, a tall man attired in a splendid cloth-of-silver costume, the arms encircled by jeweled bracelets, shimmering necklaces of pearls and moonstones hanging to his waist shawl, a naked, straight, six-foot blade across his knees. He was preceded and followed by mounted retainers, all gorgeously dressed, their beards dyed red with henna or blue with indigo, and curled and split on both sides of their brown cheeks so that they stabbed up like rams' horns.

The Caliph's herald turned to the Bagdad dignitaries, the officers and green-turbaned priests, the chiefs of tribes and ministers of the household and rich, paunchy merchants, who thronged the garden.

“The Prince of all the Indies!” he announced in a clear, ringing voice, waving his diamond-tipped staff of office. “The Ruler of the South! The Descendant of Hindustan’s many Gods! The Harrasser of his Foes! The Cousin to Vishnu, Shiva, and Brahm! He, whose palace is said to glow with the crimson sheen of a hundred thousand rubies!”

“Ah”—whispered Zemzem into Zobeid’s ear—“he is rich and powerful and glorious!”

“Indeed!” Zobeid stared through the marble screen that covered the window. She scanned the Prince’s face. She made a little grimace. “No, no!” she continued. “I do not like him for all his rubies! Haughty he seems—and cold—and stern—and forbidding!” She raised clasped hands. “O Allah!” she prayed fervently. “Grant that he may not touch the rose tree!”

And Allah listened to her prayer. For suddenly the elephant swerved and turned to one side. Zobeid laughed happily; then looked toward the gate as the herald announced the Prince of Persia, surrounded by mounted, raw-boned, steel-clad, hard-riding warriors, while he

himself was reclining luxuriously on a silken litter slung between two shaggy Bactrian dromedaries, occasionally dipping a plump, be-ringed hand into a jeweled box and helping himself liberally to pink and rose-red sweet-meats.

“Khalaf Mansur Nasir-ud-din Nadir Khan Kuli Khan Durani, Prince and King of Persia,” proclaimed the herald, “Shah-in-Shah of Khorassan and Azerbaian, Khan of the Kizilbashis and”

“Oh! Zemzem! Look at him!” exclaimed Zobeid while the herald continued the recital of the many grandiose titles. “Does he not look exactly like a pig—with his fat, pink cheeks—his fat, pink button of a nose—his short, round body? And his little mustache! Is it not exactly like a pig’s curling tail?”

An unflattering description. But true. For, whatever his tough-thewed ancestors, this Prince of Persia had forgotten their prowess in the pleasures of the table, was valiant with steel only where the carving of juicy mutton joints and not the cutting-off of enemies’ heads was concerned; and the ancient Arab chronicles

relate that it took three strong men to lift him to his throne, and seven yards of cloth to make a shawl for his enormous stomach.

“His nightly dinner,” says the ancient chronicle, “consisted of a goose stuffed with a duck, the duck stuffed with a chicken, the chicken with a quail, the quail with a pigeon, the pigeon with a lark, and the lark with an oyster. He had a thirst worthy of those Scottish barbarians of whom our traveling merchants bring fantastic tales. He looked, to the casual observer, like a huge balloon filled with seventy times seventy pounds of grease and wobbly flesh”

A statement to which Zobeid agreed.

“A balloon!” she exclaimed. “Why—the man is made of lard! Oh—Allah—do Thou keep this mountain of fat from touching my rose tree!”

But there was small danger of that. For, even had he wished it, even had he known the fortune-teller’s prophecy, his huge bulk would have made it impossible for him to lean from the litter and touch the odorous, red-blooming tree.

“Praised be Allah the One!” exclaimed

Zobeid while, without her noticing it, Fount-in-the-Forest, an idea shaping rapidly in her shrewd brain, slipped out of the room, down a secret stair-case into the garden where, a few minutes later, a veil hiding her features, she mingled with the retinue of Cham Sheng, Prince of the Mongols, who just then was entering the palace grounds with pomp and circumstance.

Once before, earlier in the day, she had communicated with the Mongols. For her soul was seared with hate against the Arabs, the Moslems, who had enslaved her, and there was in her the wish and hope that Cham Sheng, her countryman, might wed Zobeid and, after the Caliph's death, bring the dominion of Bagdad under the Mongols' spurred heel.

A wish, incidentally, quite in keeping with that of Cham Sheng himself.

He was different, in every last characteristic, from the Prince of India and the Prince of Persia. There was about the latter, for all his ludicrous looks and sensuous living, a certain soft, ingenuous loveliness, and about the former a sweeping, godlike nobility. But the

Mongol was of the earth earthy; his was an enormous ruthlessness of purpose, a cruel ambition, a stupendous, racial vigor and crunching strength. Time and again he had said to Wong K'ai, his confidential advisor, a man educated in the Palace of August and Happy Wisdom in Pekin's Tartar City, that he would take Bagdad: either by marrying the Princess or, should he fail in this, by an unhallowed trinity of intrigue, patience, and force.

"Perhaps," Wong K'ai had said, "such is the will of the many blessed gods."

"It is mine own will, fool!" the other had sneered. "Mine own will—stronger than the will of all the many gods put together!"

When early in the morning Fount-in-the-Forest had visited the Mongol encampment, she had assured Wong K'ai that, a Mongol to the core of her, she would do all in her power to further the Mongol Prince's cause. Now here she was again, mingling with the retinue and presently, having reached Wong K'ai's side, whispering to him the secret of the rose tree and the fortune-teller's prophecy.

"These Arabs," she added contemptuously,

"are superstitious. They believe in such portents."

"Ten thousand thanks!" replied Wong K'ai. "Exquisite and charming honors shall be thine when Cham Sheng shall plant the standard of the Five-Clawed Golden Dragon upon the walls of Bagdad!"

And, entering the Prince's palanquin, he brought to his master the slave girl's message.

This palanquin was an immense affair. Built on a marble platform, reached front and back by broad stairs and carried on the shoulders of a hundred red-faced warriors, it resembled a Chinese pagoda, surmounted by a peaked cupola. The walls of the pagoda were of malachite and jasper, carved into an inter-lacing scroll work of plum-blossoms and wind-swept reeds, while the cupola was of gold and inlaid with crystal, ivory, white and green jade, turmaline and agate, in a design of great, coiling dragons. The palanquin was surrounded by Tartar, Mongol, and Manchu horsemen, each riding under a flag painted with the device of his tribe or clan. There was here the banner of the White Tiger, the banner of the Red

Tiger, of the Azure Dragon, of the Purple Light, of Sublime Union, and a hundred more; and, greater than all the other banners, carried by two gigantic, yellow-skinned priests, the banner of the Buddha of the Paradise of the West and the banner of the Buddha of the Light without Measure.

Thus the procession entered the grounds, while the Caliph's herald announced the princely visitor:

"Cham Sheng, Prince of the Mongols, King of Ho Sho, Khan of the Golden Horde, Khan of the Silver Horde"

"Heaven-Born!" cried Zemzem. "Look—look . . ."

"Oh!"

For the palanquin had stopped. Its front door was thrown wide open; and, slowly, majestically, his tall, lean form robed in crimson satin embroidered over the right shoulder with a five-clawed, golden dragon, a carved jade sceptre in his left hand, Cham Sheng came down the steps, into the garden.

When Zobeid saw him she shuddered. His face was butter-yellow, with high cheekbones;

and there was in his narrow-lidded, purple-black eyes the infinite, cruel, passionless look of one who has gazed too much on danger and death and desolation, without ever feeling the pity and shame and sorrow of it.

“Oh!” sobbed Zobeid. “He chills my blood with fear!”

And she shook as if in an ague, while Fountain-in-the-Forest changed shrill, triumphant laughter into a cough, and while, a thin, ironic smile curling his bloodless lips, the Prince of the Mongols, as if aimlessly, negligently, with all his slow racial dignity, turned toward the rose tree.

“O Allah! Help me, All-Merciful Allah!” came Zobeid’s heartbroken sob. “Please! Please! Do not permit him to touch the rose tree”

But prayers were forgotten, fear was forgotten the very next moment when, with the Caliph’s herald announcing the arrival of yet another suitor, she looked toward the outer gate.

“Why” Zemzem made wondering comment—“I thought there were only three

Princes coming to woo you! And here comes a fourth! Who might he be . . . ?”

“Who might he be?” echoed Fount-in-the-Forest, with angry suspicion.

“Who might he be?” echoed the curious crowd in the garden.

“Who might he be?” echoed Cham Sheng to Wong K'ai in a low voice.

“Who might he be?” echoed Zobeid, a strange, sweet sensation clutching her heart.

And the herald gave answer:

“Ahmed, Prince of the Isles and of the Seven Palaces!”

“By the Excellent Lord Buddha!” whispered Cham Sheng to his confidential clerk.

“There is no such rank or title!”

And he turned away from the rose tree without touching it to stare at Ahmed, who rode toward the palace, superbly mounted on a stolen, snow-white stallion, superbly robed in stolen, gold-threaded brocade, superbly armed with stolen, jeweled scimitar and battle-ax, followed by Bird-of-Evil, perched like a monkey on a tiny, grey donkey, his finery only a shade less costly than Ahmed's. The latter rode his

horse well, with a loose rein and long stirrups, swaying gracefully in the saddle. High in the air he carried his head, and when he came trotting beneath Zobeid's window, she smiled.

"Ah!" she said to Zemzem. "He rides like a Prince! He looks like a Prince! He is the Prince for me! Allah! Permit him to touch the rose tree—as he has already touched my heart!"

Fount-in-the-Forest stood by her mistress' side. She wondered, puzzled: who was this Prince of the Isles? Where had she seen him?

Down in the garden Wong K'ai was whispering to his master that, as to this new suitor's rank and titles, he would look into them presently; but in the meantime . . . "Please, O Great Dragon! Remember the fortune-teller's prophecy! Remember the Arab superstition! Whoever is first to touch the rose tree"

"Yes, yes!" replied Cham Sheng.

He stepped forward; and while, horror-struck, Zobeid watched, he raised a thin, yellow hand to pluck one of the flowers.

At which precise moment, up in the Seventh Hall of the Blessed, the Angle of the Scrolls, the Black-Winged Angel of Destiny, hearing Zobeid's silent prayers to Allah, decided to interfere. He interfered by ordering a tiny honey-bee that had been sucking at the rose's sugary heart to fly out suddenly with a whirring of brown-and-gold wings, to light on the Mongol Prince's hand before he could touch the blossom, to sting him painfully, and to cause him to recede a few steps. A moment later, perhaps to make assurance doubly sure, the Angel of the Scrolls ordered the same little honey-bee to fly from Cham Sheng's hand unto the back of Ahmed's horse. The horse became frightened. It bucked and reared; and before the Thief of Bagdad could pull down on the snaffle and gain control over his nervous mount, it catapulted him out of the saddle, shot him through the air in an audacious curve, and deposited him in the very midst of the rose tree.

The Princess broke into peals of laughter.

"By Allah!" she exclaimed. "Behold! He has touched the rose tree!"

"Touched it?" commented Zemzem, echoing

her mistress' laughter. "Why—he has nearly crushed it!"

Ahmed accepted the accident with supreme unselfconsciousness. Calmly he plucked one of the roses, stuck it in his waist shawl, and jumped lightly out of the tree and to the ground, not far from Cham Sheng, who spoke to him gliding, low words of bitter irony.

"How tragic it would have been, O great Prince of the Isles, if the horse had killed you and—ah—ended your doubtless ancient and illustrious dynasty!"

He turned away, while Bird-of-Evil drew his friend to one side.

"The Mongol pig suspects you," he whispered. "Hurry up, soul of my soul, and steal the Princess. Here!"—pressing a small crystal bottle into his hand. "This is the drug. And—here—take this bit of cloth. Sprinkle a few drops of the drug on it and"

"No, no!" interrupted the Thief of Bagdad. "I shall sprinkle the drug on the rose—the rose of destiny"

And he opened the bottle and saturated the crimson flower with the subtle Egyptian liquid.



CHAPTER IV



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HALF an hour earlier, while the Prince of India was entering the palace grounds, Bird-of-Evil had asked a pert-eyed, golden-skinned slave girl how to reach the back entrance to the Princess Zobeid's apartment. He had employed methods peculiarly his own, combining bribery, flattery, and—in spite of his shriveled, wizen outer man—open, rather riotous love making.

“Tell me, Rejoicer of Souls!” he had whispered to her. “For, when the ceremonies are over, I must see thee! Aye! I must! For thou art a bud to be worn in the turban of my heart! I would like to be thy lover, O Small, Soft Thing! I would like to crush thy lips with mine! Tell me the way, O Moon of my Delight!”

She had told him; and now he was following her directions, taking Ahmed around the corner of the main garden path to a wall, topped by a parapet that surrounded a loggia and

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covered all the way up by a strong-stemmed, flowering vine.

"I shall wait below," he said. "If anybody approaches I shall whistle twice—like a crane. Up with you!"

So up went the Thief of Bagdad, using the vine like a rope ladder, reached the parapet, leaped over it, and found himself in the presence of Zobeid, who had heard the noise and, a strange premonition in her soul, had come on a run. They faced each other. He did not speak. Silently he offered her the drugged rose. She took it. She was about to inhale its perfume when, dropping her hand, she asked a low-voiced question:

"Do you love me, Prince of the Isles?"

She stood there, without moving, her eyes starry, her lips parted: expectant she seemed, and triumphant, and yet a little frightened. He came a step nearer. He sensed the magic of her beauty, her presence, with the blurred indistinctness of overwhelming tenderness.

"Yes—yes" he said—"I love you"

“How much do you love me, Prince of the Isles?”

“I love you—oh—with all of me! To hold you I would throw a noose around the far stars. I would give you all I have, all I am, all I ever shall be, and it would not be the thousandth part of my love for you.”

“And I”—she whispered—“I love you!”

She was about to raise the drugged flower to her face when, suddenly, a revulsion of feeling swept over Ahmed. Yes—he said to himself—he loved her. He needed her. He wanted her. He could not do without her. Life without her would be as salt, as pain, as bitter as gall. But she must become his of her own free will, not through intrigue and stratagem and deceit and subtle Egyptian drug. He was on the point of confessing, of telling her: “I am a nobody! I am the Thief of Bagdad!” But words would not come to him. The shame of it choked him. He drew her to him. As if by accident, his fingers playing with hers, he slipped the rose from her hand and crushed it in his waist shawl. Almost immediately he released her. He ran back to the parapet.

"No—no—" he stammered; and, like a thousand lovers since the beginning of Allah's creation, like a thousand lovers until the end of Allah's creation, he spoke words, so usual, so commonplace, so trite, and which he felt and knew to be so intensely true: "I am not worthy of you, Zobeid! Not worthy of you!" And he leaped over the parapet and, climbing down rapidly, reached the ground.

When Bird-of-Evil saw him, alone, without the Princess, he spread angry, impatient hands.

"Where is she?" he demanded. "Did you not give her the drug?"

"I could not," Ahmed replied.

"Why not?"

"You—you would not understand!"

"Wouldn't I? Tell me! Tell me!"

"Very well. I would not use the drug—because I love her!"

"You are a fool!"

"Doubtless!"

And Ahmed turned away, to leave the garden, to leave the palace grounds, to leave Bagdad. But it was too late. For, hardly had he turned the corner of the main path, when there

came to meet him a number of palace officials who salaamed deeply and spoke polite words:

“We have searched everywhere for you. The Caliph of Bagdad awaits the princely suitors. Be pleased to come with us, O Prince of the Isles!”

So Kismet engulfed the Thief of Bagdad in its merciless whirlpool while Zobeid—slyly laughing at what she thought to be her lover’s shyness, loving him the more because of it—sent a message to her father that she had made up her mind:

“Four are the Princes of Asia who ask for my hand. From India comes one. He is the descendant of the many gods of his people. But shall I choose for the sake of birth? From Persia comes the second. His wealth is as the sands of the desert. But shall I choose for the sake of riches? From far, yellow Mongolia comes the third. Him a million steel-clad riders follow into battle. But shall I choose for the sake of power? There is yet a fourth Prince. I do not know if he be rich or powerful, nor what his ancestry. But him I love, and him

I choose, as, according to immemorial tradition, those of my race have always chosen the ones whom they love, as thou, father mine, years ago, didst choose my dead mother—may her soul dwell in Paradise!”

And, sitting on his jeweled peacock throne in the great hall of audiences, the Caliph of Bagdad smiled as he thought of his daughter’s message.

The hall of audiences was an immense quadrangle. Up to a height of twenty feet the walls were covered with ivory and snowy enamel skillfully blended with shiny-white lac and overlaid with a silver-threaded spider’s web of arabesques as exquisite as the finest lace. The upper part of the walls, above a broad strip of quotations from the Koran carved from black marble, was a procession, a panorama of fresco paintings—an epitome, a résumé, of all Islam’s proud history. There was an immense dazzlement of light from a hundred crystal chandeliers; catching the vivid flutter of the war banners where the chiefs of the outer tribes were squatting at the back of the hall; rousing the

silken gowns of the Bagdad dignitaries who sat cross-legged on pillows to the left of the peacock throne into tulip brilliancies of purples and blues and yellows and reds; stabbing gold and silver into the splendid robes of the three Princes—not to forget the fourth, the self-styled Prince of the Isles—who were just below the throne, facing it.

The Prince of India carried his head high. He was a descendant of the gods, cousin-in-blood to Vishnu the Creator, Shiva the Preserver, Doorga the Destroyer. Sure he was of his Fate. Zobeid would be his. How could it be otherwise?

The Prince of Persia was stuffing his mouth with candied violets. He was rich. No woman could withstand riches. By Allah—he thought—this soft little Zobeid would be sweeter than all the sweetmeats that he had swallowed in all his life!—and so, in the meantime, he helped himself to another piece of candy.

The Prince of the Mongols seemed inscrutable; like a golden statue. He would win the Princess, happen what may. If not today, then tomorrow. He was a Mongol. He came from

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the cold, cruel, stony North. His will was stronger than the will of all the household gods, stronger even than the will of the Excellent Lord Gautama Buddha.

Only the Prince of the Isles was oppressed. Shame was searing his brain and soul like a red-hot lance point. He did not look up, paid no attention to Bird-of-Evil, who stood in back of him, whispering into his ear.

The Caliph rose.

"It is the immemorial custom of my family," he said, "that when princely suitors come from the far corners of the earth to woo a daughter of the house of Bagdad, she may follow the dictates of her own heart. Four Princes came today. I am honored." He bowed gracefully. "My daughter watched them from the balcony. She has chosen. She has chosen the man whom she loves. To him she sends her ring as a token."

And he gave to the herald who approached a narrow gold band set with great ruby-red pearls in the shape of two joined hearts.

Came a great thumping of silver kettle drums; a blaring of long-stemmed trumpets; a

waving of banners, while the herald stepped down from the throne. He passed by the Prince of India, the Prince of Persia, the Prince of the Mongols. He stopped in front of the Prince of the Isles, salaamed deeply, and slipped the ring on Ahmed's finger.

Then cheers rose, rending the air. The dignitaries of the court, the chiefs of the outer tribes, the priests and merchants and slaves and eunuchs who pressed into the hall from the garden, laughed and shouted.

Cheer after cheer, full-throated, triumphant, bloating, rising ever higher. But, too, grumbling, bitter words as the three Princes complained and protested that the choice was manifestly unfair. What?—they demanded—Zobeid did not choose *me*, the descendant of the gods; nor *me*, whose riches were uncounted; nor *me*, whom a million warriors followed into battle? Listen, listen, Heaven-Born . . . they surrounded the Caliph, who had left the peacock throne, with noisy clamorings.

But the ruler of Bagdad smiled. He stroked his long, white beard, and declared that the choice was final.

"My friends," he implored, "do not behave like naughty children. I grant you—for I am a proud father—that there is no woman in all Asia to equal Zobeid in beauty and charm and the many accomplishments. But even so, do not challenge the decrees of Fate! Do not begrudge the Prince of the Isles his victory! Be generous! Come—and drown your sorrow in clinking goblets and rich food!"

And, while they continued to protest and grumble, he led them toward the banquet hall where a splendid feast had been prepared.

Ahmed had used the commotion and excitement to slip, unnoticed, into the garden.

"Where are you going?" demanded Bird-of-Evil, trotting at his heels like a dog.

"Away from here!"

"But—the Princess Zobeid . . ."

"I will not stoop to deceit and lies . . ."

"Pah!" sneered the other. "The tom-cat eats a thousand chickens—then he goes on pilgrimage to the holy places! You are a thief!"

"I know! And I will steal everything—everything—including the Prophet Moham-med's green mantle and diamond crown! But

I will not steal the heart of the one whom I love!"

So he ran down the garden path when, suddenly, as he passed a small marble pavilion, he heard soft words, turned, looked, and saw there, Zobeid, who walked up to him.

"My lord," she said, "my slaves brought word to me that you left the hall and came to the garden. You came to see me—to seek me—didn't you? Ah—I knew it! And *I* came to see *you*—to seek *you*"

She lifted her face to his, to kiss him. But he shook his head. He dropped the ring into her hand. Then, in simple words, he told her the truth:

"I am not a Prince. I am a nobody, an outcast. I am a thief."

"A thief . . ." Fount-in-the-Forest who, unnoticed, had followed her mistress and was hiding in a thick clump of trees close by, echoed to herself. All at once she remembered where and when she had seen Ahmed. Why—he was the robber who last night had entered Zobeid's room, who had threatened her with the dagger, and had escaped through the window.

Swiftly she ran back to the palace. She sought out Wong K'ai, the Mongol Prince's confidential adviser, and told him what she had discovered. Wong K'ai lost no time. He entered the banquet hall. He whispered in Cham Sheng's ear. The latter rose. He addressed the Caliph.

"Your Majesty," he said, "desecration most foul has been brought upon your ancient dynasty. The escutcheon of the Bagdad Caliphs has been sullied. This Ahmed—he who calls himself Prince of the Isles, he to whom your daughter has promised her heart and hand—is nothing but an imposter, a common thief, whose kingdom is bazar and market-place and whose wealth what is contained in other men's pockets!" And when the Caliph stammered that he did not believe it, that it was impossible, the Mongol went on: "There is no doubt of it. One of the Princess' slave girls recognized him. Nor will he himself dare to deny it."

The Caliph turned to his armed attendants. He shook in a palsy of fury.

"Bring me this Ahmed, this thief!" he thundered.

At once servants, soldiers, and eunuchs poured through the palace and the grounds while, in the garden pavilion, Ahmed was imploring Zobeid to forgive him the arrogance of his love for the sake of the greatness of his love.

"I saw you last night," he said. "I was the robber who entered your apartment. And I—oh—I could not help it. Life without you—why—it was like the starless night loud with rain! I longed for you! I longed for you so! My longing was as the whisper of all the ages of creation—without beginning—and without end. Please—please—forgive me—why"

"Ahmed!" she interrupted him. "Thief of Bagdad! Thief indeed, you are! But"—her voice dropped—"it has not decreased my love for you, nor changed it. Here"—she slipped the ring on his finger—"come back to me—some day! I shall be waiting for you until . . ."

"Until?"

"Until you have reclaimed the good that is in you—the brave—the splendid—the honest—the fine—the decent! I trust you utterly, dear"

And then, suddenly, she stopped, turned,

listened, as from the distance came the clank of steel and hectic, staccato shouts:

“The thief! The thief! Hunt him down!”

“Quick!” she exclaimed. “Hide yourself!”

But it was too late. Already soldiers came pouring into the pavilion. Ahmed defended himself, fighting bravely. His sword leaped to his hand like a sentient being, flashed free of the jeweled velvet scabbard, caught the haggard rays of the dying sun so that it glistened from point to pommel like a chain of diamonds. In and at them he went, with a stamping of feet, a harsh, guttural Arab war cry, his weapon dancing a saraband. But the odds were against him. A blow from a battle-axe against the hilt of his sword sent it spinning, disarming him. They pulled him down as hounds pull down a stag, and dragged him into the presence of the Caliph.

“The truth!” demanded the latter. “Who are you?”

“I am a thief!” replied Ahmed; and a smile curled his lips at the remembrance that Zobeid loved him, although he was what he was.

“Dog!” the Caliph bellowed with rage; he

struck Ahmed heavily across the mouth. "Son of a dog with a dog's heart! Ah—let us see how you will like the song of the whip!" He turned to the servants. "Flog him!"

A moment later Ahmed had been stripped and trussed. Swish, swish, swish!—went the rhinoceros-hide flails, whistling through the air with a triumphant, vindictive scream, curling about his back, cutting it into raw, bleeding pulp. And still he smiled; still he thought of Zobeid, of her words: "I love you! I shall wait for you! I trust you utterly!" until the Caliph, watching, seeing the smile on his face, broke into thin, cruel laughter.

"Ah!" he said. "We shall yet change your impudent smile into a grimace of pain. Let us consider what tortures we may invent for you." And when the Mongol Prince whispered into his ear, he laughed again. "You are right, Cham Sheng!" he continued. "A splendid, novel, gorgeous idea! Worthy of a Mongol indeed!" He turned to the slaves. "Throw this thief to the gorilla! Let us see of what he can rob the ape, or if belike the gorilla will be the better thief—plucking out our clever

thief's eyes and tongue—tearing him limb from limb!”

And they dragged him from the hall toward the underground cave where the huge brute was kept during the day.

Zemzem had overheard. She ran to Zobeid and brought her word of it.

The latter had been in the depths of grief and despair. Now, typically, she dried her tears. For, although soft, emotional, thoroughly feminine, given to dreams, she emerged from her dreams to be frankly practical when faced by a hard emergency. So it was today. She must save her lover. She knew that force was out of the question, and that it would be impossible to argue and plead with her father. Remained one weapon: bribery. She took from about her neck a string of fifty priceless, evenly matched black pearls; tore it apart; and gave the dark-shimmering heap to Zemzem.

“A pearl to every soldier of the guard!” she said. “Have them set Ahmed in safety through the secret wall panel into the street!”

Zemzem hurried off. The soldiers of the guard obeyed readily and gladly. Slaves them-

selves, there was in their heart no rancor or hate, in fact rather a certain admiration, for the Thief of Bagdad. Too, here was treasure; a priceless pearl for each of them; and no risk of discovery. For how would anybody ever know of it? They would not tell; the Princess would not tell; Ahmed would not tell; and the gorilla was unable to tell! So, swiftly, secretly, they hastened Ahmed by a back path into a small, walled garden heavy with the acrid scent of marigold and the pungent, cloying sweetness of red jasmine, thence by an underground passage that ran for nearly a mile and through a grass-covered, intricate trap door into an empty, deserted street, with a kindly:

“May Allah protect you, O Thief of Bagdad!”

And there he sat, alone with the pain in his body, the pain in his soul, until the sun died in a sickly haze of coppery brown and the moon boomed up in the West, stabbed on the outer horns of the world, dispassionate, calm, indifferent to the heart of man.

There he sat the night through, until the wind drove the dusk toward the East and the

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sky flushed with the jade-green of young morning; until, with the sun rising higher and higher, there echoed from the palace a great blaring of trumpets and beating of drums and, not long afterwards Bird-of-Evil, who had escaped with the help of one of the soldiers, joined his friend and told him what had happened.

It appeared that, after the thief's exposure, the Caliph had gone to his daughter and had bid her choose another husband. Stoutly Zobeid had maintained that, happen what may, she loved the Thief of Bagdad, until her father, at the end of his patience, had said that he himself would choose her husband from among the three Princes and had left her in a towering rage. Then a realization of her helplessness had come to Zobeid. She turned to her slaves, Zemzem and Therrya, who were in the room.

"What shall I do?" she had asked.

Again Therrya, the fortune-teller, had spread the heap of Meccan sand. Again the golden grains had gradually formed the hazy outlines of a rose.

"Heaven-Born!" she had exclaimed. "Be-

hold! It is an assured thing. He who first touched the rose tree—he will be your husband!”

“But—what can I do?”

“You must fight for time!”

So Zobeid had gone to the Caliph, had salaamed, had kissed his hand, had asked for forgiveness.

“Father mine,” she had implored, “I do not know my own mind.”

“Very well. I shall choose for you.”

“No, no! Leave the decision to Kismet, to Fate!”

“How, daughter?”

“Bid the three Princes go away in search of rare treasure. Bid them return here at the end of the seventh moon. I shall then wed the one who brings me the greatest rarity. For he shall thus have proved himself most worthy of my love!”

The Caliph had approved of his daughter’s suggestion; so had the three Princes; and even now—amidst the blaring of trumpets the beating of kettle drums, and the fluttering of ban-

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ners, they were leaving Bagdad, agreeing to return at the end of the seventh moon.

The Prince of India, riding in the golden *howdah* atop his elephant, smiled thinly. He was sure of the quest, sure of the outcome. The gods, his ancestors, would help him.

Smiled, too, reclining in his litter, the Prince of Persia, fully as self-sufficient as the former. His wealth was untold. The greatest rarity in the world, Zobeid wanted? Very well. He would find it. He would buy it for her, if it cost him the revenues of a thousand cities.

Smiled, finally, sitting in his palanquin, the Prince of the Mongols. But for better, sounder reasons than the other two he spoke to Wong K'ai:

"Many are the traders and merchants and cameleers, who, every day, pass from my country into the land of the Arabs. Many will come during the next seven months. You will remain behind, here in Bagdad, to supervise them, to train them, to give them the signal if the time should come. For the traders who will come here during the next seven months, will be the pick of my warriors in disguise. The

rarest thing in the world? Aye—I shall search for it! But, should I fail, I shall have yet a rarer thing: force! We shall conquer Bagdad regardless of its stout walls! We shall conquer it from the inside—when those peaceful Mongol traders exchange their silken robes for chain armor, their account books for buffalo-hide shields, and their pens and ink for lances and scimitars!”

So the three Princes left Bagdad, while Bird-of-Evil whispered advice into Ahmed’s ear:

“Look! Behind you is the secret panel. It helped you to get out. Doubtless it will help you to get in again. Nor—” he laughed—“will you need the Egyptian drug this time. The Princess loves you. She will go with you of her own free will.”

“I am not worthy of her!”

“Fool! Fool! Fool!”

But Ahmed did not reply. He walked away, hurt in body and heart; and it is related in the ancient Arabic chronicles that, as he walked, a strange thing happened to him.

“For,” says the ancient chronicle, “as the Thief of Bagdad turned into the Square of the

One-Eyed Jew, it seemed to him, suddenly, as if a mysterious force came out of the nowhere, with a great whirring of wings, like the wings of his soul, his own soul, tortured, suffering, trying to escape the cage of the dust-created flesh. Steadily this force was urging him on, compellingly, irresistibly, until—he did not know how and why—he found himself in the very mosque where, only a few days earlier, he had defied Allah and the Prophet Mohammed—on Him the Peace! And there the priest—may he walk with the blessed in the Seventh Hall of Paradise!—came up to him and bade him welcome in the name of the Prophet Mohammed—on Him the Peace!”

The priest smiled when he recognized Ahmed.

“You look troubled and grief-stricken,” he said gently. “Tell me, little brother. Perhaps I can help you.”

“I am searching.”

“Searching for what?”

“For the unobtainable!”

“There is nothing unobtainable,” said the Holy Man, “if your will be strong and your heart pure.”

"My will is strong," replied the Thief of Bagdad, "but my heart is not pure."

"Then you must make it pure."

"How?"

"Through the dust and the grime of suffering and patience! Through the clear water of courage—of honesty—of decent endeavor—of faith in the Lord God!"

"Teach me, O Holy Man!"

"I shall, little brother!"

And then, when Ahmed had told him the full tale of his sins, of his love, and of his despair, the priest took him to the Eastern gate of Bagdad and gave to him a sword.

"Go out on pilgrimage!" he said. "Your way to happiness will be long and weary. Patience you will need, and courage. Aye—patience and courage and the greatest faith in the world! Step out upon your path of thorns. At the end of the path—if your heart be cleansed of all sin—you will find a silver chest. This chest contains the greatest magic in the world. Go forth. Find the chest. Earn it. And return!"

Ahmed kissed the priest's hand. Then he

took the ring which Zobeid had given to him and, drawing his sword, cut it in two. He placed one half on his finger, giving the other half to the priest.

“Send this to her,” he said, “who already has my heart!”

And so the Thief of Bagdad left his native town in search of his own soul.



CHAPTER V



CHAPTER V

TEN miles to the East of Bagdad was the oasis of Terek el Bey. Greenly and peacefully, in the shadow of an immense, dun-colored limestone rock that seemed as if tossed there by a Titan's playful fist, it squatted athwart the yellow swash of the desert, stippled with the *bayt es-shaar*, the nomads' felt tents black as the tents of Kedar in Hebrew Scripture. Here, with a stirrup cup and courtly words, the three Princes said farewell to each other—"we shall meet again at the end of the seventh moon"—for here the overland road to Bagdad split in three directions.

One branch stretched East, straight East as flies the crow, crossing the great desert of Arabistan where the sands spawned their golden, cosmic, eternal centuries, and debouching at the Cape of the Ras Mussendom that dropped with a rocky avalanche into the Persian Gulf where swift, square-rigged Arab sail-

ing craft connected with Karachi, the Indian port. Thence a narrow trail, coiling like a shimmering silver snake over the ochre loam of the plains, led to Puri, the ancient capital founded by the gods themselves, and there the Prince of India intended taking counsel with the Swami Haridat Rashiq Lall, a learned Brahmin priest who was reputed to be in the odor of sanctity, a man of wisdom as wide as the shoreless seas.

To quote a contemporary and doubtless truthful Hindu account:

“The Swami was the father and mother of all knowledge. He wrote a learned tome anent the metaphysical differences between Substance and Unsubstance when his mother’s milk was not yet dry on his lips; on his fourth birthday he surprised and delighted his parents, and made other Brahmin boys’ parents envious, by memorizing and reciting the ninety-nine thousand verses of the Holy Vedas; he was familiar with the innermost secrets of eternal and infinite principles before he was eleven; when he was twelve he had written a critical study about the leading Hindu critics’ commentaries that

dealt with Buddhist critics of the Shintoist critical school; and he was considered the equal of the eleven hundred and seventeen minor gods before his mustache had begun to sprout."

Small wonder, therefore, that the Prince of India, riding his elephant to the East, smiled ironically as he thought how foolish the other two Princes were in endeavoring to compete with him in the quest for the greatest rarity on earth.

The Prince of Persia took the second road, North over the snow-topped fastness of the Caucasus, then Southeast into the foot hills of Luristan where, beneath a tropical sun, the rocks seemed like glowing heaps of topaz and the scorched, flayed ridges, like carved masses of amethyst and ruddy quartz. Here the road dipped East, skirting the yellow fields and crimson rose gardens of Kerman, to find its goal in Shiraz. At the latter place, in the far-flung Bazar of the Badakshani Merchants, everything precious and incredible that had ever come out of Asia as well as out of the lands of the European barbarians, was for sale. There a display of phoenix eggs, dragon teeth, and

green diamonds from the Mountains of the Moon was an every-day occurrence that did not create even the slightest ripple of excitement.

There, too, lived a certain Hakim Ali who was reputed to be the son of a union between the Archangel Ishrafil and a female desert vampire from Kurdistan. None knew how old he was: some said a thousand years, while more conservative people put his age at seven centuries. But all the world agreed that, though preferring the garb and mode of life of a beggar, nothing under the sun was hidden from his eyes.

Him the Prince of Persia had decided to consult; and, like his brother of India, he laughed maliciously as his litter bore him on his way.

The Prince of the Mongols took the third road, the long, the cold, the hard road to the Northeast; travelling by swift relays of Bactrian camels and shaggy Tartar ponies and white reindeer through the bleak, inhospitable steppes of Turkestan and Siberia; slashing rapidly through the frozen, black slush of Outer Mongolia; mounting and descending the hard-baked, shimmering snow of the Salt Range,

that seemed hooded and grim like the gigantic eyebrows of some ancient heathen god; finally after a short halt at his capital of Kahn Baligh—the Tartar town which the Chinese call Peking—wending on toward the far, mysterious Island of Wak that, separated from the Manchurian coast by a narrow channel, glimmered like a jewel of smoky purple and dull orange.

He, too, was sure of his quest. For in an underground temple at Wak lived a Tunguz medicineman who had discovered—others said, had made with his own hands—a certain dread fruit which held in its evil heart instantaneous power over life and death . . . without doubt a treasure so extraordinary and exotic that, compared to it, anything the other two Princes might find, would seem like a child's brittle, useless toy.

So the Prince of the Mongols smiled—as smiled the other two. But there was a better, sounder reason for his sardonic amusement. For he was an intensely practical man. He believed in making assurance doubly sure; even trebly sure. Thus, not satisfied with the treasure of the Island of Wak, nor yet satisfied with

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his plan of sending Mongol warriors disguised as peaceful traders to Bagdad in case anything should go wrong, he furthermore gave orders to his spies to follow and shadow the Princes of India and Persia and to report to him by swift messengers whatever they might find out.

He wasted never a thought on the self-styled Prince of the Isles, the Thief of Bagdad.

He imagined that by this time the latter had been thoroughly killed, thoroughly eaten, and thoroughly digested by the Caliph's gorilla. And even had he known of Ahmed's escape, he would not have worried: Ahmed, the lonely man, the thief, the outcast, with every man's hand against his—with nothing but his sword, his small bag of provisions and, perhaps a faint hope—out on the bitter, thorny path—out to conquer, first himself, and then the greatest treasure on earth!

Hard, hard was the beginning of Ahmed's road.

For it led him through the Valley of the Seven Temptations, where not even his sword was of help to him, and where he had no weapon nor shield except his own heart.

This valley was inhabited by the spirits of those who had died by giving way to one of the seven temptations, the seven deadly sins of man. These spirits crawled like worms along the ground or flew on black wings amongst the trees while skeletons, whose moldy, yellow bones were held together by bits of charred sinew, followed them as the murderer does his victim. The air was filled with their shrill and pitiful cries; and, occasionally, by a heartbreaking sob of relief when a spirit, his period of punishment over, was reincarnated by Allah into a new body, to return once more to earthly existence, to be faced once more by the seven temptations, perhaps to win out on his next road through life. Here, too, malignant dwarfs and witches with shriveled, bluish-phosphorescent skin and ruby-red eyes leaped about like hobgoblins, yelling at the heavens with the hooting of the owl, the bark of the hyena, and the jackal's long, wild, lonely cry. For they were the spirits who have been twice born, had twice succumbed to temptation, and were doomed to live in the valley for the length of three hundred and seven eternities.

There were, furthermore, many other dreadful sights and sounds which the ancient Arab chronicler refuses to describe . . . “for fear,” he says, “that I might cause the reader’s heart to stop from beating with the black horror of it!”

But Ahmed passed unharmed through the Valley of the Seven Temptations, with the help of prayer and faith: faith in Allah, the One, that was slowly growing in his inmost soul. And by the time he had left the valley and was climbing up toward the Hill of Eternal Fire, the Hill of Pride, he had sloughed his old lawless passions as snakes slough their skin in spring and had begun to admit that there was a Master greater than his own will, finer and nobler than his own desires.

Thus, when he reached the outer, red-glowing wall of the Hill of Eternal Fire, the Hill of Pride, he gave thanks to the Creator, crying: “*Allahu akbar*—God is great!” and: “*Subhan ’llah*—I sing the praises of God!”; and he gave a solemn vow that, should he pass unscathed through the perils of his journey, he would hereafter obey the five cardinal ordi-

nances of the Prophet Mohammed's teaching: he would repeat his daily prayers to Allah; he would observe the month of Ramazzan with scrupulous care, fasting during thirty days from sunrise to sunset; he would give the prescribed alms to the poor; he would live a clean life; and he would make the *Haj*, the pilgrimage to Mecca.

He smiled, just a little sheepishly, a little self-consciously, as he remembered his former boast that Allah was only a myth and that a man who was worth his salt took what he wished without asking leave from anyone.

"*Allahu akbar*—God is great!" he repeated, as the Hill of Eternal Fire, the Hill of Pride, rose before him like a gigantic flame.

By this time the Prince of Persia was drawing near to Shiraz, leaning back, as was his habit, on the heaped, silken pillows of his litter; helping himself liberally to sweetmeats and sugared pistache nuts; listening drowsily to a little slave girl curled at his feet, who was crooning him to sleep with a lilting 'Afghan love song:

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“Since my sight fell on those dark eyes of thine,
Never can I forget those lovely eyes of thine.
Of the hawk’s are they? The peacock’s or the
falcon’s?

Or of the soft-eyed antelope? The glances of
thine eyes?

As the lambs crouch hidden in the pasture,
From the shade of thy tresses look those gentle
eyes of thine.

As the armed trooper stands, his lance in hand
beside him,

Thus stand the long lashes round those warring
eyes of thine.

As one who has drunk wine, thus intoxicated is
my being

Whether they be Priests or Dervishes or even
Hermits,

On each one’s heart they feed, those cruel
eyes of thine.

Yet whatever thou wouldst gaze on, look well
upon me,

O Fathma! while there is power of seeing in
thine eyes”

So the litter—with the Prince by this time

sound asleep and snoring loudly through his nose, like a guttural and raucous accompaniment to the little slave girl's dulcet piping—reached the Bazar of the Badakshani Merchants; and the Prince kept on sleeping and snoring although there was a great cheering and huzzaing, and although the stalwart soldiers who preceded the litter made the air ring with defiant and rude shouts as they cleared the way with:

“O thy right!”—yelling as they brought down their long, brass-tipped staves with full force. “O thy left! O thy face! O thy ear! O thy heel!”—suiting the swing of their sticks to the part of Asian anatomy which they were striking—“O thy back, thy back, thy back! Give way, ignoble and unmentionable ones! Give way, sellers of unclean filth! Give way, leprous sons of burnt fathers!”

But, in spite of the soldiers' abuse, the merchants, knowing of old the Prince to be an extravagant spender, crowded about the litter, pushing and jostling each other, heaping their treasures of jewels and brocades and embroideries and perfume and costly rarities about the

snoring potentate's small, fat feet, vociferously clamoring that he should look, touch, buy:

"Behold, Protector of the Pitiful! Only a thousand Persian gold pieces for this priceless emerald! See! It is flawless and cut in the form of a Kashmiri parrot! Only a thousand gold pieces—and I am losing money on the transaction—may I be father to my sons!"

"Behold, O Heaven-Born! A pink turmaline from Tartary as big as my head! Its touch is guaranteed to cure fever, dyspepsia, whitlows, and the pain of sorrowing hearts! Call me a Jew, a Christian, a bath servant, a cut-off one, if I lie!"

"Look, look, look, O Great and Exquisite Moon! Look, O Holder of the Scales of Benevolence with the Strength of Thy Hands! This brocade—look, look—it was woven by the daughter of the King of Germany as a ransom for her father, captured in battle! The diamonds with which it is encrusted—look, look—they are the tears, crystalized by the will of Allah, which she shed while weaving the extraordinary fabric!"

"Look!" "Buy!" "Look!" "Buy!"

The pulling, bartering symphony rose ever more shrilly until the Prince, at last awakened by the tumult, sat up, opened his eyes, rubbed them, and dismissed the merchants with a promise to look at their wares some other time. Today he could not. For he was awaiting Hakim Ali, that descendant of the Archangel Ishrafil and the Kurdish vampire, who had been notified of the Prince's coming by a swift messenger galloping ahead of the caravan.

Hakim Ali, in spite of his—to say the least—peculiar, mixed ancestry, was a good, one hundred per cent Persian patriot and eager to do all in his unhallowed power so as to help his sovereign lord. He came now, crippled, naked but for a beggar's loin cloth, and carried in the arms of two slaves. His was not a very prepossessing exterior. His eyes were yellow flecked with green, his hair was red, and his face brown—unpleasantly so, resembling in color, texture and outlines an over-dried cocoanut. His body was emaciated and ribbed like a bamboo frame, and from his mother, the Kurdish vampire, he had inherited birds' claws that took the place of hands and

feet. From her, too, he had inherited the neat, furry little tail, very much like a goat's, that he whisked from side to side to drive away the flies and mosquitoes and that he used to gesture with as mere humans use their hands.

And violently he gestured with his tail when the Prince told him about Zobeid and his overwhelming love for her.

"Bah!" exclaimed Hakim Ali. "Your words are as wind in my ears! Personally I disapprove of women. The Lord God created them only so as to prevent life from being as charming and agreeable as it might otherwise be."

"You dislike women?"

"I do not care for them. These seven centuries or so have I been a confirmed bachelor."

"But"—objected the Prince—"I love her."

"Did not the Prophet Mohammed—on Him the salute!—say that Allah has not left any calamity more hurtful to man than woman?" came the other's pious quotation.

"Doubtless the Prophet—on Him the blessings!—was right. But still—I love Zobeid. For the sake of one of her precious eyelashes

would I commit the many sins. And so I want her to be my wife."

"By my tail! Almost a woman's reason!" exclaimed Hakim Ali impatiently, scratching his nose with his left hind claw—"that is to say, no reason at all!"

But the Prince of India was stubborn in his resolve. He implored the other to help him find the greatest treasure, the most exotic rarity on earth, adding: "There is no price I would not be willing to pay for it, including the revenues of all my kingdom, and all the jewels of my ancient dynasty!"

Hakim Ali laughed.

"My lord," he replied, "you will not have to pay one millionth part of it."

With his tail he pointed at a bazar booth where a mass of Persian, Bokharan, and Turkish rugs was heaped up for sale, precious, silken masterpieces of the weaver's art, gay with furnace-crimson and cherry-red and lilac subtle as a spirit flame, with serpent-green and emerald-green, with amber like the bloom of grapes and the dead-gold of autumn leaves, with black and silver as a fervid summer night

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that is flashed by lightnings and with delicate yellow as the seedling of a pea.

“Rugs? Bah!” objected the Prince. “All the world has rugs.”

Again Hakim Ali laughed. He pointed to the corner where, carelessly, negligently thrown, was a threadbare, worn, drab-colored square of carpet with a fair fringe all round.

“Look at it!” he said.

“What about it?”

“Buy it. Ten silver pieces will be enough.”

“Why should I buy it?”

“Because”—Hakim Ali lowered his voice—“there is nothing rarer in the Seven Worlds of Allah’s Creation.”

And then, when the transaction had been finished through the Prince’s majordomo who, incidentally, bargained the rug dealer down to six pieces of silver and deducted twenty-five per cent from this sum as his personal commission, Hakim Ali whispered into the Prince’s ear the secret of the rug:

“Not one of these foolish Badakshani merchants knows its value nor its hidden mystery. You see”—talking in a flat, sibilant purr—“it

is the magic carpet of Isfahan—the flying carpet of Isfahan!”

“What?” interrupted the Prince with rising excitement. “You don’t mean to say that it is really . . .”

“Yes! I mean it! There is no doubt of it! It *is* the magic carpet! Stand on it! Sit on it! Squat on it! Then tell the rug where you wish to go! And—swish, swish, swish! like the shooting of dragon-flies—it will rise into the air, it will cut through the sky, high up, above the roofs, above the clouds, and carry you wherever you command. *Hai—ho—hee!*” he laughed vindictively, triumphantly—“for years it has been in this bazar—for all the world’s fools to spit on and wipe their feet on. And none knew! None knew!”

“Thank you, thank you!” exclaimed the Prince, while the servants stowed away the magic carpet in the litter. “Name your reward!”

“Don’t thank me—yet!” sneered Hakim Ali. “For, doubtless, you will win Zobeid with this rug.”

“That is just why I am thanking you!”

“That is just why you should not thank me! Woman? By Allah! Has it not been said that woman is an inflicter of grief in love as well as in hate? Has it not been said: ‘Among the philosophers, the Chinese; among the beasts, the fox; among the birds, the jackdaw; among men, the barber; and in all the world woman—is the most crafty?’ Has it not been said, furthermore: ‘The beauty of the lark is in its song, good manners are the beauty of an ugly man, forgiveness the beauty of the devotee, and the beauty of woman is virtue—but where shall we find a virtuous woman?’ *Wah!*” he rumbled on. “I have always considered the female of the species a sort of walking, two-legged pest, whose mission on earth, like the mission of mosquitoes”—here he flicked a mosquito away with his tail—“is only to prevent our being too happy! No, no, my lord! Do not thank me!”

And the Hakim, still laughing disagreeably, was carried away by his slaves, while the Prince of Persia, reclining in his litter, left Shiraz.

He was serene and happy. The end of the first moon—and already he had acquired the

treasure wherewith to win the Princess' hand. Why—he thought—he was in no hurry to return to Bagdad; would be able to stop for a couple of months at Kerman. For this was the season when the purple plums and purple melons of Kerman were ripe! Ah!—he smacked his fat lips—a lamb, stuffed with nuts and raisins and roasted whole; a heaped platter of plums; a bottle of golden Khaketian wine; and a melon—perhaps two melons—as dessert! Life was worth the living indeed!

He fell asleep, while the little slave girl, curled at his feet, crooned a lilting, lisping Afghan love song, and while the Mongol Prince's spy, who had watched and listened, rode swiftly toward the North to make report to his master.

On he rode; over the ragged, bitter crests of the mountains, across sudden valleys, flanking the dwarf dikes of the poppy fields, on through the huge, grey flat of the upland desert that was seamed with wide sheets of tufaceous gypsum shining like mirrors; on, ever hurrying, grudging the hours of rest spent in camp and

towns by the way; galloping his shaggy pony no matter how rough and steep the road; knowing well that the Mongol Prince, while punishing cruelly those who disobeyed, rewarded liberally those who obeyed and rendered fair service.

And it was an ironic twisting of Fate that, without knowing it, the spy passed within a short distance of the Hill of Eternal Fire, the Hill of Pride, where the Thief of Bagdad was facing his second ordeal.

This Hill—wrongly so called—was an enormous defile, cleft between towering black walls, and in the centre of it a great, seething, rock-lined caldron of flames, perhaps three miles across, fed by the pride of unjust men and fallen Angels.

Hard was the road up the defile to the stepping of Ahmed's feet. Stronger and stronger, as he toiled upwards, his lungs beating like a hammer, the heat from the caldron, as he approached it, sucking through the defile as through a chimney and scorching his face, grew the temptation to return, to give up this pilgrimage. Was Zobeid, his love for her and her

love for him, worth this terrible suffering of his flesh and his soul? Was anything under heaven worth it?

“Return, O fool! Return!” whispered his brain. “Go back to Bagdad! There is a life of ease and plenty waiting for you in bazar and marketplace! Why strive for the unobtainable?”

But while his brain reasoned, his soul prayed; mechanically at first; then ardently, fervently; until—dimly, gradually—he began to comprehend that Allah was something far greater, more immeasurable, more vast, both more merciless and more kindly, than hitherto he had been able to grasp. Something there was in Allah’s will, he knew, he felt, which gave unity and coherence and reason to all, even to sufferings and martyrdom, and he might some day lay hold of this something, the Infinite, through his faith, and thus vaguely, but truly and indeed, see the shining face of God.

Reasoned his brain:

“Return, O fool!”

Said his soul:

“Keep on your road! For everything is of

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God—you yourself, your weakness, your strength, your love for Zobeid, your faith, your doubts!”

So with the understanding of God's eternal omnipotence, humility came to the Thief of Bagdad while step by step as he neared the seething caldron and while his flesh suffered ever more intensely with the enormous, cruel, splintering heat, the temptation to return, to give up his pilgrimage, vanished and thinned and disappeared completely; was only a drab memory when at last he reached the caldron—and looked down—and shuddered.

Around the rim of the caldron the flames licked up like speckled, blotched, luminous reptiles; like cobras with dripping lips, stained crimson and scarlet by the blood of sacrifice; coiling about the souls of the unjust men and the fallen Angels with the destroying heat of their flaming bodies, cleansing the sin-scabbed spirits as in a crucible; while smoke, blue, black, grey—the sins of these souls released from the pure, spiritual matter—rolled on and up in gloomy, grotesque, sinister garlands. Farther toward the centre of the caldron the flames

peaked a thousand feet high in a supreme travail and martyrdom, melting the rocks here and there, bursting them asunder, so that they tumbled down, loud-booming, like the black crack of doom. 'And still the blaze soared up, spread up, twirled up, forked up; red-hearted, blue-tipped, yellow-frayed; and ever and anon, when the black-winged 'Angel of Death tossed another soul of pride and injustice into the caldron, there would come an immense shrieking and yelling, and the flames would shoot higher—ever higher.

Ahmed looked. He stared. How might he cross? There seemed no way, except to swim across these flames as across a river. And again temptation touched him. He would return. He was too weak to face this ordeal.

Curiously, with the thought, with the very realization of his weakness, something strengthened his resolve and, by the same token, steeled his will power. For, as he admitted his weakness, his pride died; as his pride died, his humility increased; as his humility increased, his belief in Allah's mercy grew; and as his belief grew, he saw dimly at first, then more and more

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clearly, rocks rising out of the ocean of fire—rocks that seemed untouched by the seething, hissing whirlpool of flame—"the Rocks of Faith," the ancient Arab chronicle calls them. The first rock was only a couple of feet from the rim. Ahmed measured the distance with his eyes. Yes, he said to himself, by vaulting high and straight he might reach it. Again he stared into the flaming sea. Beyond the first, he saw a second rock like a small, flat-topped island; beyond the second, a third; a fourth; a fifth; a whole chain of them; and at the opposite side of the caldron he saw, shimmering like a holy silver grail through the crimson curtain of fire, a limpid stream of water that rippled from a basalt wall—"the Stream of God's Charity," according to the ancient manuscript that has brought down to us the tale of the Thief of Bagdad.

He longed for the coolness of this stream. The longing grew. He made up his mind. He would risk the journey across the precarious bridge of rocks. He whispered a short, fervent prayer:

"El-hamdoo 'lillahi Rub el-amin—unto

God be all glory, the Lord of the Worlds!”

Then he leaped away from the rim, with all his lithe, clean young strength; leaped high and straight, with never the shadow of fear in his heart. He reached the first rock; trembled a little, then balanced himself, his agile, bare toes gripping the slippery stones.

Again he mumbled a prayer:

“Yah abeyd Ullah, la ilah ill’ Ullah, wahed Ullah—verily I declare that there is no God but the Lord God—one the Lord God is!”

Again he leaped while the tossing flames beneath him licked up with their cruel red tongues—missing him—just missing him. So he reached the third rock, the fourth, the fifth, and with every keen, lean, straight jump his confidence became stronger until at last he found himself at the opposite side of the caldron, where he bathed his face and hands and soul in the cool, healing water from “the Stream of God’s Charity.”

Yet, grateful, humbled, having shed his pride as if it were a soiled turban cloth, he was still the old Ahmed, merry and gay, with ever a joke on his lips, a jest ever in his heart,

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and looking back at the seething, hissing maelstrom of fire, he said:

“If the Prince of Persia had to vault across this caldron—by my teeth and my honor!—his fat body would have melted and would have reeked to heaven like a mountain of grease sizzling in a gigantic skillet. If the Prince of the Mongols had attempted it—*hayah!*—his proud and haughty soul would have fed these flames so that they would have flared up, high up to the Seventh Hall of the Blessed where the Prophet Mohammed—on Him the salute!—sits on his seven-stepped throne of glory. And I doubt that the Indian Prince’s divine ancestors would have helped him much. Definitely, it pays to be a thief—at least a reformed thief!”

Laughing gayly, he left the defile of the Hill of Eternal Fire, the Hill of Pride, and walked along steadily until at the beginning of the third moon he fell in with a wise hermit—a hermit, indeed, so wise that, alone in that part of the world, perhaps in all Asia, he knew all about the defects of a horse, the reasoning of a cat, the thundering of clouds, a woman’s

deeds, and a man's future fortunes. He told Ahmed that he was on the right road, but that he would first have to cross the Valley of the Monsters and the Garden of the Enchanted Trees.

"As to the latter," said the hermit, "it is your wit and cleverness that will help you; and, as to the former, your strength, your pluck, your sword."

Ahmed smiled.

"It is a good thing," he replied, "that I lost my pride in crossing the Hill of Eternal Fire. Otherwise I might say that, as to wit and cleverness, the bazars have sharpened my brain to needle point, while as to strength and pluck—by Allah and by Allah—modesty stuffs my mouth from telling you the truth!"

Then he was serious once more. For it seemed to him as though, from very far away, spanning the distance, he could hear the voice of Zobeid urging him on, telling him:

"I love you, Ahmed! I trust you—utterly! I shall wait for you!"

The voice came to him with an all-pervading sense of sweetness and peace. It came with a

wafting of jasmine and marigold perfume, a soft tinkling of far-away silver bells, and the muffled sob of a one-stringed guitar. And, indeed, at that very moment, up in the tower room of the harem, Zobeid was thinking of the Thief of Bagdad. She looked from the window, out toward the East, where, under the sweep of the twilight, the bunched, squat mass of Bagdad was reddening to russet, then chilling to a flat, silvery grey.

“Send back to me my lover, O Allah!” the prayer rose to her lips. “Dear Allah! send him back to me! For I love him—I love him so . . .”



CHAPTER VI



CHAPTER VI

IN DESCRIBING the adventures of the Prince of India during his search for the greatest rarity on earth, we are confronted not by a lack but by a superabundance, a prolixity, an extraordinary embarrassment of too much material in which we have to separate the chaff from the wheat, and vice versa. For the contemporary accounts by Hindu poets, theologians, and historians, written in the most classic and most elegant Sanskrit, fill over seven thousand enormous tomes, twisted and baroque with Oriental parlance and imagery and illustrated with countless charming miniatures. Therefore, having read and digested every last one of them, we have decided to give here only the gist of the shortest of these accounts, which begins, piously and properly:

“*Rung hao!* Hail to the gods! Greetings, salutations, and genuflections to Surya, the Sun; Vayu, the Wind; Yama, the Judge of

Souls; Varuna, the Regent of Water; Prithwi, the Earth; Lakshmi, the Dispenser of Wealth!

“Greetings to all the household gods!

“Greetings, also, to Vishnua, Shiva, and Doorga!

“Greetings, finally, to Brahm, greatest of gods! May His might be glorified and His word be exalted! For it was He who distinguished man by the garment of intellect, who adorned his exterior with splendid form and perfect figure, and who illuminated his interior with the light of knowledge. Man hath thus received the happy gift of being enabled, with clear view and penetrating reflection, to contemplate the wonders of Omnipotence and the mysteries of creation, and to know that the brocaded surface of Day, colored with brilliant and motley groupings, and the glorious curtain of Night, decorated with the light of the many stars, received not visible form without a wise Ordainer and a preventing Framer . . .”

So the original Sanskrit text rambles on for about three hundred pages to come back to earth by describing the meeting at Puri, the

ancient capital of Hindustan, between the Prince of India and the learned Brahmin priest, the Sami Haridat Rashiq Lall.

The latter, having listened to his sovereign lord's request, immediately rolled up his tongue, separated his soul from his body, and went into a trance which lasted for seven days and seven nights. Then, returning to consciousness, he declared that he had considered the matter of the Prince's marriage, and quoted the *Shastras*, the Hindu Scripture, at length:

“ ‘She who is not descended from his paternal or maternal ancestors within the sixth degree is eligible by a man of high caste for nuptials. In taking a wife let him studiously avoid the following families, be they ever so high in caste, or ever so rich in grain and cattle and gold: the family which has neglected prescribed religious duties; that which has produced no male children; that which has thick hair on its body; that whose sons have blue eyes; and that which is given to vile language.’ ”

The Swami slurred; stopped; then, smiling a little, went on:

“Rajah! I have the very wife for you. She is very learned and of good family. She is of golden color, with a dear little nose like the flower of the sesamum. Her eyes are large, like the principal leaf of the lotus. Her lips are red, like the young leaves of the mango-tree; her teeth are like pomegranate seeds; and her swaying walk is that of a drunken elephant. She is most fair amongst the fair. I repeat that she is of excellent family. She is, in fact, my daughter. Marry her, my lord, and be happy ever afterwards!”

“A curse on your daughter and her father!” exclaimed the Prince impatiently. “I told you—did I not?—that I wish to marry Princess Zobeid!”

“She is an Arab—a Moslem—a foreigner—a heathen—a cannibal of the holy cow!”

“A cannibal, too, of my heart! She has devoured it—by Shiva! I love her!”

“The gods have ordered that . . .”

“The gods may order *you*, but not *me*, to do or let undone certain things,” haughtily interrupted the Prince. “I am their descendant. I

am their equal." And when the other continued to argue and plead, he exclaimed: "Shut your lips lest your teeth catch cold! And now—tell me what I came here to consult you about. The greatest treasure on earth—where shall I find it?"

Then, as Haridat Rashiq Lall still went on voicing his objections and quoting lengthy passages from Hindu Scripture in support of his arguments, at last the Prince lost his patience and commanded his Rajput slaves to give the Holy Man a sound bastinado upon the soles of his saintly feet. They did so, trussing him up like a pig with his feet in the air, plying their bamboo staves with ardor and enthusiasm, having never liked the priest who was given to nagging and preaching and sermonizing and pointing out other people's sins and errors. After which, the soles of his feet cut to ribbons and hurting painfully, the latter was convinced that his imperial master meant what he said. So he rubbed ointment on his wounds; went into another trance which lasted for seventeen days and seventeen nights; awakened; painted a brand-new, crimson caste

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mark on his forehead; and announced that, though he still disapproved of the Rajah's decision, he had succeeded in discovering what was wanted of him:

"The rarest and most wondrous thing on earth! The goddess Doorga's left eye wherein one can see, as if graved there by a steel chisel, whatever is happening anywhere in the world!"

"For instance," asked the Prince, "could I read therein what Zobeid is doing at this very moment?"

"Indeed, O Rajah!"

"Very well. Where is this statue of Door-ga?"

"Far, far in the north! A thousand miles from here. Beyond the Suleymani Range! In the land of the heathen Afghans! In a jungle a little to the west of the city of Kandahar!"

Early the next morning the Prince of India went into the North, accompanied by a large retinue of soldiers and slaves and porters, not forgetting to take along seven Tamil sorcerers. For the Swami had warned him that he would have to cross a swamp inhabited by

ghastly and repulsive supernatural beings.

They climbed the Suleymani Range and, at the end of the second moon, came to the jungly swamp. It was guarded by a Yogi, the guardian of the swamp who, dressed in nothing but age-old dirt, squatted on a mound of earth, drumming upon a skull, and incessantly exclaiming:

"Ho, Hali! Ho, Devi! Ho, Doorga!" as he prayed to the three dread incarnations of the goddess of destruction.

But the Prince of India did not stop to argue with him. A word to his scarlet-robed executioner—the swish of a two-handed sword—and the Yogi's head rolled on the ground like an over-ripe pumpkin, while the Prince and his followers entered the dismal swamp.

The Swami's warning had been right. For it was inhabited by all the terrible creatures of the Hindu hell. There were here enormous goats with tiger claws and flat, opaque snake eyes, possessed by the souls of those who had slain Brahmins; things with the bodies of men and the faces of camels and monkeys and warts, inhabited by the souls of deniers of the

deities; huge, hideous, crawling green worms, containing the souls of priests who had eaten meat or drunk fermented liquor; blood-sucking bats who in life had stolen the property of temples; restless ghosts of those who had married low-caste women; shades for whom the funeral rites had not been correctly performed; sobbing, wailing, moaning souls fresh from the tortures of Tamisra, the Hell of Outer Darkness, and the Usipatra Vana, or Sword-Leaved Forest. There were here corpses and skeletons animated by female fiends, Duginis and Yoginis and Shankinis, dancing about in frightful revelry, and a thousand other terrible sights.

So the seven Tamil sorcerers had their work cut out for them. But, what with prayers and exorcisms and incantations, with the burning of secret incense and the mumbling of ancient spells and the beating of devil drums, they succeeded at last. The supernatural beings disappeared in a great, roaring, yellow wind; and the Prince and his retinue continued their journey until, finally, they reached the statue of Doorga, the goddess of destruction.

Standing alone, majestic and grim, in the heart of the festering, miasmatic jungle, it was raised on a tall, square pedestal on which was painted a panorama of all Hindustan's many motley myths and legends and faiths and superstitions: from the *Chhadanta Jataka*, the birth story of the Six-Tusked Elephant, most beautiful of all Indian legends, to the ancient tale of *Kaliya Damana*, which tells how Krishna overcame the hydra Kaliya; from color-blazing designs picturing Rama, Shiva, and Lakshmi meditating in their forest cells, to a representation of Bhagiratha imploring Shiva to permit the river Ganges to fall to the thirsty earth from his matted locks.

The statue itself was immense, towering over two hundred feet into the air, and carved from a single block of shiny, black basalt: with thick, blood-red, sensuous lips that were curled in a cruel smile; around its neck a double girdle of human skulls, and skulls, too, hanging from its ears; in its whirling hair a cobra, a mermaid figure of the river Ganges, a human skeleton, and the crescent moon. It had six arms. One of them held a sword, the second the blood-

dripping head of a bearded man, the third a drum, the fourth fire, while its other two hands were empty and raised to bless the worshipers. Before the statue's feet lay the utensils of sacrifice—dishes for the burnt offerings, lamps, jugs, incense, copper cups, gongs and conches.

Thus, in its solitary jungle home, as all over India, in a hundred temples from the snows of the Himalayas to the moist reek of Cape Comorin, towered Doorga, the Great Mother, the Emblem of Lust and Destruction—that unspeakable Representation of the Mysteries and Cruelties of Life!

The Prince looked at the idol. He murmured a prayer:

“O Six-Armed Reverence! O Mother of all the spirits—of Alays and Gumas, Baitals and Yakshas of dreadful forms! Bless me, O Doorga! O Smashana Kali!”

Again he looked at the statue. Its right eye, carved from the basalt, was painted a bright yellow. But the left, distinct even from this distance, was an immense crystal which mirrored the dance of the clouds.

The magic crystal! The magic globe! The greatest rarity in the world! The treasure with which to buy the Princess Zobeid and Bagdad!

For a moment he was conscious of certain misgivings. Should he risk it? Should he mutilate Doorga, the Great Mother, the dread goddess of Destruction? Should he pluck out this wondrous eye of hers?

Quickly he overcame this feeling of misgiving. By cutting out her eye he would bring Bagdad and all Arabistan under his sway—under the sway, thus, of India's gods—of Door-ga herself. Yes. Doorga would understand.

Only, before sending up a man to cut out the eye, he decided to propitiate the goddess with proper worship. He spoke to his priests and sorcerers; and, shortly afterwards, the worship commenced according to the ancient rites, with a procession of Hindus advancing through the forest and jungle toward the idol, singing, playing on instruments, on *esraj* and *sitar* and *tabla*, carrying swinging lamps that stabbed points of yellow and gold through the greenish gloom of the jungle, others carrying

wreaths of orchids and bowls filled with milk and fruit and sweetmeats.

At the end of the procession came the Prince himself. He was flanked at the left by a tall, mitred high-priest in white robes, and at the right by another ministrant, swinging a flat incense burner on silver chains.

Around and around he swung it, and there rose long, slow streamers of perfumed, many-colored smoke—wavering and glimmering like molten gold, blazing with all the deep, translucent yellows of amber and topaz, flaming through a stark, crimson incandescence into a great, metallic blue, then trembling into jasper and opal flames, like a gigantic rainbow forged in the heat of a wondrous furnace. Up swirled the streams of smoke, tearing themselves into floating tatters of half-transparent veil, pouring through the jungle and clinging to the trees, the bushes, the statue of Doorga.

Straight up to the idol moved the procession, bowing with outstretched hands, depositing their offerings at Doorga's feet, and chanting their litanies—with a gathering, bloating volume of voices, gradually shaping the words

until the full hymn, the full melody, the full meaning beat up like an ocean of eternity, the whole punctuated by the hollow, staccato thump of the drums:

“Ho, Kali! Ho, Devi! Ho, Doorga, Doorga, Doorga! Thou who holdest a sword in thy lotus-like hands—who art fearless—who art black as the clouds—whose form is terrible—who dwellest in burning ground . . .”

The voices dropped to a flat humming and purring. Then a wail of drums and cymbals, a shrill piping of reed-flutes in ear-splitting waves of sound—and once more the chanting rose loudly, while the swinging incense-burner poured out a thick cloud of cloying, dead-sweet smoke, like an impalpable cloud of dread superstitions—the soul of their ancient Hindu faith in scented, vapory form:

“. . . nor this the weapons pierce; nor this does fire burn; nor this does water wet, nor the wind dry up—Doorga, Doorga! O harasser of Thy foes eternal—all-pervading and constant Thou! Changeless, yet ever changing; unmanifest, unrecognizable Thou, and unvarying . . .”

The voices of the worshipers peaked to a hideous, insane, soul-freezing pitch. They burst forth in thick, palpable fervor:

“Hail, Mother! Hail, goddess of a thousand names! For as a destructress Thou art Kali! As a reproducer Thou art symbolized by the Yoni! Thou art the Mother of the Universe, in the holy reincarnation of Jagan-Matri! As Parvati, Thou dost protect the hillmen, and Thou art also Sati, Tara, and Bhaivana herself, the consort of Shiva! Ho, Kali! Ho, Devi! Ho, Doorga! Help us cross the Vaitarami, the dread stream of death! Help us over the horrors of the outer darkness Tamisra, across the sword-leaved forest of Usipatra Vana!”

Then the high-priest raised his hands to command silence; and he broke into a chant, between speaking and singing:

“Hail, Mother! Hail, six-armed goddess of horrid form, around whose neck hangs a string of human skulls, a precious pendant! Hail, malign and blessed image of destructiveness! Listen Thou to my Mantra!”

“Ho, Kali! Ho, Smashana Kali!”—the

worshipers prayed and chanted and groaned.

Some were half mad with excitement, and every once in a while one of them would jump up with a throaty yell, swing into the open space in front of the pedestal with a whirling, gyrating motion, and dance before the jeering, black statue with horrible gestures—and over all the sullen, palsying din of the drums and cymbals and tomtoms—and the red, floating, swirling wreaths of incense smoke—until at last, through sheer, physical exhaustion of the worshipers, the ceremony came to an end.

There was in the Prince's entourage a young Brahmin from Madras, called Asoka Kumar Mitra. This youth was very learned and of excellent family. His was an absolute purity of living and thinking, so exemplary that he even refused to look at his own great-grandmother, an ugly, shriveled old woman, unless her face was covered by a thick veil; his character was irreproachable; his honor unstained; and his charity so great that he used for himself only one hundredth part of his income and divided all the rest in equal proportions be-

tween saintly beggars, one half to Bairagis or Vishnu's mendicants, the other half to Sanyasis or ash-smear'd worshipers of Shiva. Him the Prince of India commanded to climb the statue and remove the left eye from its stone socket.

"For," he added, "your hand is as pure as your heart. Your touch will be gentle to Doorga."

The youth trembled with fear.

"Heaven-Born," he replied, "I am afraid."

"Afraid? Of what, may I ask?"

"To remove the eye—oh—it would be a terrible affront to the goddess!"

"Is that all?" smiled the Prince carelessly. "Have no fear. Doorga is my cousin. I myself absolve you of all sin."

But still Asoka Kumar Mitra hesitated, and the Prince was about to lose his temper—which had always been short—when the high-priest whispered a word in his ear:

"You cannot do it, my lord."

"By Shiva!" exclaimed the Prince. "Was there ever a Rajah in all Hindustan as plagued with objecting, arguing, nagging, contradict-

ing, cursed fools as I am? Why can't I do it?"

"Because"—the high-priest pointed at the grim, fiendish statue—"Doorga is not yet appeased."

"We prayed to her. We worshiped her according to the proper rites."

"I know. But she demands a sacrifice."

"We offered milk and flowers and fruit and sweetmeats."

"This is the month of pilgrimages, Heaven-Born," argued the high-priest. "This month Doorga demands a sacrifice of blood—to smell sweetly in her nostrils!"

"Very well," said the Prince. "I shall sacrifice to her when I return to Puri. I shall give to her a holocaust of thirty white sheep, thirty black sheep, three virgins and seven Brahmin youths of excellent family. I give oath!" He bowed toward Doorga. "And now"—turning to Asoka Kumar Mitra—"up with you, my lad. And have no fear. No sin is yours. I absolve you!"

It is a disputable point what caused the young Brahmin to obey. Perhaps he did so

because he had faith in the Prince's divine connections; perhaps, on the other hand, because just then the Prince was making a significant gesture in the direction of his red-robed executioner. At all events, up he went; mounting the pedestal; escalading the idol's huge feet; scrambling up to its left knee, whence, slowly, warily, precariously, he scaled the hip's enormous, curved circumference; reaching out and grasping one of the great arms and using it as if it were a ladder; attaining the hand which held the blood-dripping head of a bearded man; sitting astride its thumb for a few moments to rest himself and regain his breath.

Down below the Prince urged him on with hearty words; and so the youth vaulted in a keen leap toward the statue's thick, sensuous lips; got there in safety; and at last pulled himself up to the left eye, standing on the stony rim of the socket.

He took a sharp chisel from his waist shawl; worked assiduously for several minutes until he had removed the eye. And then—was it fear of the goddess' revenge, or was it a plain case of dizziness?—suddenly he gave a cry of

terror. His feet slipped. His knees gave. He lost his balance. He tried to steady himself; could not; and, the crystal hugged against his breast, fell down, through the air, in a fantastic curve, striking the ground, two hundred feet below, with a sickening thud and crash.

There was complete silence. Silence of utter terror. The youth was dead.

Then the high-priest broke into a loud chant of thanksgiving:

“Ho, Devi! Ho, Doorga! Ho, Smashana Kali! Thou hast listened to my Mantra! Thou hast accepted the sacrifice! Blessed be Thy name, O Great Mother!”

Quickly he bent over the dead. With agile, practiced fingers he opened a vein and drained a generous quantity of blood into a sacerdotal bowl. He poured it out at the feet of the idol while the worshipers prayed and chanted, and while the Prince picked up the crystal eye which had remained unbroken in spite of the fall.

He held it high.

He looked into its milky whiteness. The greatest rarity in the world, he thought trium-

phantly, well worth the death of a thousand young Brahmins! The treasure by the strength of which Zobeid would be his! Then, at the thought of her, he spoke her name. He addressed the crystal:

“Tell me, O magic crystal, what Zobeid is doing at this moment!”

At once the globe clouded, to become a moment later like a vivid, colored miniature that showed Zobeid on the balcony of her room, staring with starry eyes into the distance—eyes that were full of longing and love and faith.

“By Shiva!” thought the **Rajah**, who all his life had had an excellent conceit of himself. “The Crusher of Hearts is thinking of me!”

It would have shocked him dreadfully had he been able to read the words which Zobeid’s lips were forming silently:

“Ahmed! Ahmed! Soul of my soul! Oh—my Ahmed—how I wish that I could be with you—to help you—help you in your search!”

And indeed right then the Thief of Bagdad was in dire need of help.

For he was about to cross the Valley of the

Monsters, the Valley of Evil Thoughts, where all the envies and jealousies and bad wishes formed in the human brain since God created Adam out of clay mixed with water and Eve from a crooked rib of Adam's body, lie in ambush for the traveler—unless there be no rancor in his soul and no envy nor malevolence in his heart.

In this valley dangers of all kinds were as thick as hair in the tail of the blue-faced Vindhya monkey. Here were slippery rocks and timber falls and jagged precipices; impetuous torrents flashing down their beds of black stone; and no path except a fugitive track through the undergrowth, hardly discernible, wiped by the poisonous breath of the jungle into a dim, smelly mire which bubbled and sucked—seemed to reach out for those who dared tread its foul solitude.

Ahmed gripped his sword and steeled his will. He walked on.

Cable-like, spiky creepers dropped low from the trees and struck his face; they opened before him with a dull, gurgling sound as he brushed them aside with fist or sword point;

they closed behind him as if the jungle had stepped away for a second to let him through, leisurely, contemptuously, invincibly, to bar his way, should he attempt to return.

Darkness came suddenly. It came with black thunder clouds and the fiery, crimson, forked tongues of lightning. All about him Ahmed could hear the night cries of wild animals; the trumpeting of gigantic elephants; the grisly laugh of the foul, spotted hyenas; the howling of tigers; the hissing of cobras; and the whimpering of wild dogs coursing in packs on the tracks of their prey.

Fear dropped on him like a sodden blanket. He thought of the Prince of India, the Prince of Persia, the Prince of the Mongols. Thought of them with envy in his heart and rancor in his soul. They were strong. They were powerful. They were rich. They had thousands and thousands of armed retainers and wise men to obey their every wish, while he was alone in all the world, with nobody to lend him a helping hand.

“Allah!” he exclaimed. “How I envy them!”

And, as his lips pronounced the words, all at once the darkness was cleft in two by an immense shaft of quivering, yellow light, and he saw, square in his path, a huge monster facing him.

It towered above him like a mountain. Its shape was that of a dragon covered with green, steely scales, a swishing tail that wound up in a forest of lances, an enormous, cavernous mouth that was armed with a treble row of dagger-sharp teeth and dripping with blood and black venom, and eight legs with claws large enough to rip an elephant to pieces as if it were a mouse and to tear a banyan tree up by the roots as if it were a small weed.

It saw Ahmed, and made for him with a great, clumsy leap, breathing a column of smoke and fire from its nostrils.

The Thief of Bagdad was about to turn tail and run away. But he reconsidered. He had no chance of escape. The dragon would overtake him at a single leap; would swallow him at a single mouthful.

All right—he said to himself—it was quite

hopeless; but at least he would die fighting. So he lunged at the brute with the point of his sword; missed; leaped nimbly to one side to evade the monster's claws; lunged again, missed again, again leaped to safety.

"*Hai!*" he gave his guttural war cry. "*Hai!*" and gradually, as he fought, the envy and rancor in his heart began to pale, and there came to him a certain high, reckless, clanking courage—nor exactly a courage of despair.

Up from the ground he vaulted with both feet, striking with all his strength. The dragon grunted, doubtless surprised that this small lump of humanity should dare resist him and give battle, and receded a step.

Ahmed laughed.

"Pig!" he shouted at the brute. "Wart! Jew! Christian! Unclean and ludicrous pimple! Come here and fight!"

The envy in his heart paling more and more, he went to the attack, fighting after the time-honored manner of Arab swordsmen; bending almost double; skipping in a lithe, rapid circle; executing various gambados and measured leaps; springing forward like a monkey and

backward like a toad; beating with his sword upon the monster's tough hide so that it rattled like a drum.

"Hai! Hai! Hai!"

Why—he thought—he was really thoroughly enjoying himself! Bah!—with all their might and wealth the three Princes of Asia would never be able to fight as he was fighting. Envy them? By the Prophet—let *them* envy *him*! And, as his brain conceived and formed the thought, all at once his sword point found a soft spot between the monster's green, steely scales. The point entered, twisted, tore, cut, ripped; and with a great, wailing roar, the dragon fell on its side, breathed one final column of smoke and fire through its nostrils, and died.

"By the Prophet—on Him the salute!" the Thief of Bagdad said to himself, not at all modestly. "Pluck does it every time!"

He shook his right hand with his left, congratulating himself. He kicked the dead dragon contemptuously in the ribs, wiped his sword with a handful of grass, left the Valley of the Monsters, the Valley of Evil Thoughts,

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and turning the corner, found himself at the very entrance of the Garden of the Enchanted Trees, the Garden of Wisdom and Wit.



CHAPTER VII



CHAPTER VII

THE garden was a sweet and charming spot.

Here the dark-hued tamala trees, bearded to the waist with grey and greyish-blue moss, served as a foil for the crimson glory of the pippal and pepper trees, the elfin-green and emerald-green exuberance of the cinnamon palms, and the majestic, columnar aisles of the banyan figs. From trunk to trunk, like bridges for the tiny, chattering, rust-red monkeys to pass across, stretched cordages of tough-stemmed, waxen orchids; while the ground was a rich mosaic of scarlet asoka flowers, cliterias of palest pastel blue, daks orange-yellow as the harvest moon, madhavis as white as the snows of the Himalayas, purple star flowers, and perfumed cascades of red and white jasmine. Farther on were trellised walks closely roofed with heliotrope creepers, the golden, heavy blooms of the mango trees, and enor-

mous, sweet-scented clusters of chambela blossoms.

There were few sounds. Only gently, softly, the humming of the bees plying their task amidst the flowers; and from time to time the dulcet notes of a kokila bird or the sobbing, minor wail of a turtle-dove deeply hid in its leafy bower.

Peace and happiness.

Peace and happiness, too, in Ahmed's heart as he walked through the garden, a song on his lips.

And then, quite suddenly, without reason, he became conscious of a feeling, not exactly of terror, but of a vague uneasiness; and the very next second he perceived the cause of it. For it seemed to him that, as he walked, the garden was walking with him, each tree and flower and bush, each orchid-laden creeper and tiniest blade of grass moving with him in a parallel line so that, for all his steady walking, he really did not move an inch.

Was it his imagination?

He decided to find out. He stopped dead in his tracks, and stared straight and hard at

an enormous cluster of purple orchids spotted with tawny orange a few feet away from him, at the exact height of his eyes. Never for a second looking away, he walked on. Swiftly he walked, with a full, free swing of arms and hips. He ran, faster and faster and faster; and—yes, there was no doubt of it—the cluster of orchids remained where it was, in front of his eyes; the whole Enchanted Garden was keeping step with him.

Again he stopped. He scratched his head, deliberating what he had better do. He repeated the experiment with the same result. Once more the garden moved in a parallel line with him.

“Allah!” he exclaimed. “What miracle be this?”

The next moment, as if in answer, he heard mocking, ironic laughter issue from a gnarled tamala tree. The tree laughed so heartily that its long beard of grey moss shook and its leaves trembled and danced, while all the other trees, all the flowers and bushes and blades of grass took up the laughter in a mad, whirling chorus.

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The merry sounds flowed on, pouring about Ahmed's ears like the murmur of a stream through summer fields; and, as he shook his head, wondering what to do, the tamala tree which had laughed first spoke words—in excellent, fluent Arabic with hardly a trace of foreign accent:

“Ah—my Ahmed! Ah—my clever, clever Thief of Bagdad! let us see if your wisdom be as vast as ours and your wit as sharp as ours. Let us see if you will be able to solve the secret of the Enchanted Garden. How, my darling Ahmed, are you going to get out of here? Tell me! Tell me!” And again the tree laughed loudly and mockingly: “Ho—ho—ho!”

“Ho—ho—ho!” echoed the Enchanted Garden.

Almost at once, quickly as the shadow of a leaf through summer dusk, an idea came to Ahmed.

For let us recall that, born and bred in Bagdad's coiling streets, having made his living in bazar and marketplace as one of the foremost members of Bagdad's Ancient and Honorable

Guild of Thieves, he had learned there many subtle skills and twists of brain, had learned to be gliding of thought and tongue so as to find a shift with any man's wiles.

Years ago, when Bird-of-Evil had been the master thief and he a mere beginner, the other had taught him that in a tight corner silence was the sharpest weapon in the world, and that the listener has all the advantage over the talker. For the more the latter speaks, the more he becomes involved and tangled in his own web of words and the more anxious he grows to receive an answer, be it in agreement or in contradiction, from the other; until finally, should the listener in spite of all provocation keep his tongue between his teeth, the talker is liable to lose his patience and to blurt out the very things he meant to conceal: valuable secret or gossip or information.

"A fool plays the flute before the buffalo," Bird-of-Evil used to say. "But the buffalo continues to sit and ruminate."

Ahmed smiled as he decided to put his friend's theory into practice. His first surprise over, he made believe that he was not at

all aware of the tree's laughter and mocking words. He yawned elaborately, stretched his arms as if he were tired with walking, and sat down in the shade of the loquacious tree, leaning against the trunk, while above him the tree continued to jabber and jeer and blabber like an old spinster cackling over the cook pots.

"How are you going to get out of here?" demanded the tree.

No answer. Only a loud, rude yawn.

"Ho—ho!" sneered the tree. "You may have to live forever in this garden until your beard sprouts, young man, and grows to be as long as this moss of mine!"

Still no answer. Once more Ahmed yawned; blinked his eyes sleepily.

"Thief!" exclaimed the tree. "Thief of Bagdad! Are you listening to me?" And, a little more impatiently: "Ahmed! Answer me! Are you listening?" And, still more impatiently, with a slight growl of anger that caused his bark to wriggle like the hide of an old elephant: "Are you deaf? Answer me! I demand an answer!"

Ahmed rubbed his eyes. Then he whistled

to himself, softly, negligently, while the tree began to shake with rage, to stammer and stutter:

“Behold me this fool! This idiot! This half-wit! A clever man, he calls himself! He boasts of it! And there he sits, silent, deaf, dumb! By Allah! A fool indeed! The sort of fool who fasts for a whole year—and then breaks his fast with an onion!”

Still Ahmed kept as silent as the desert at noon, thinking to himself: “Expect good from the wicked; drain the swallow’s milk; pluck a hog’s wool; cause the sand to yield pomegranates; fix a pump in the middle of the sea; put a male elephant in the nest of a humming-bird—then make the silent talk!” Until the tree, utterly exasperated, broke into a perfect storm of hysterical vituperations, cursing Ahmed’s ancestors for seven generations, cursing his problematical descendants, and winding up with:

“An Arab he calls himself! But I think he lies! He cannot understand the Prophet’s language! He is a Jew! A Christian! Perhaps a Chinese! Or a woolly-haired, thin-

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shanked one from Africa! Deaf he is, and dumb! Why—even if I told him right now that, to get out of the Enchanted Garden, all he has to do is to pronounce three times the name of Allah and touch the little brown spot on my green trunk which conceals my heart with the second finger of his left hand—even then he would not understand—the fool—the idiot—the half-wit—the dunce—the dolt! Brothers and sisters!”—addressing the whole garden—“I am afraid that this Ahmed will have to stay here until he dies! And what a dreadful bore that will be for the lot of us!”

“Don’t worry, O wise tree!” laughed Ahmed, jumping up.

He looked for the brown spot on the trunk, found it, and touched it with the second finger of his left hand, while three times he pronounced the Creator’s name. Then, at once, the tree seemed to change its shape. The foliage dropped away as did the bark; and, instead of a tree stood a very old man, with long green, hair, a long green beard, green eyes, green skin. His very toe nails were green, and green was

his voice—if voice can be said to have a color—as he said to Ahmed:

“Fool you may be, but I am the greater fool. For you fooled me to the Sultan’s taste with your cursed silence. See”—he pointed at the Enchanted Garden and at an opening in its wall of trees beyond which was a sun-bathed clearing—“you have broken the spell. The road is yonder—the road down which you must step on your search for happiness!”

“Shall I find the silver chest on this road, the magic chest, the greatest treasure on earth?”

“I am not sure,” replied the tree-man. “You have done well so far. You have conquered your pride, your envy, and your jealousy. You have shown courage. You have accepted the blessed faith of the Prophet Mohammed—on Him the salute! And—” with a rather self-conscious laugh—“I personally can testify to your wisdom and wit. But I cannot tell you a thing about the silver chest. You will have to ask the Old Man of the Midnight Sea.”

“Where does he live?”

“Over there!” The other pointed vaguely

to the East and, before Ahmed could ask another question, he changed back into a tree—a very silent tree this time, just as maddeningly silent as the Thief of Bagdad had been a few minutes before.

So Ahmed went on his way, meeting with various, incredible adventures, until finally he met the Old Man of the Midnight Sea—"The Sea of Resignation to Fate," as the ancient Arab chronicle interprets it.

But speaking about Resignation to Fate, here was one virtue in which the Prince of Mongols was decidedly lacking.

"I am my own Fate!" he used to exclaim; and, at least where the Princess Zobeid was concerned, he tried his best to make this boast come true.

For by this time, traveling down the great Central Asian overland road in the guise of peaceful merchants, the pick of his Tartar, Manchu and Mongol fighting-men had entered Bagdad. They had taken up their living quarters in various caravanserais within easy reach of the Caliph's palace in case of sudden mobilization and attack. During the day they squat-

ted in their bazar booths, exchanging the mellow produce of the Far East for Arabistan's silks and scents and forged steel; in the evening they met in a deserted cemetery outside of Bagdad's walls, where Wong K'ai, the Mongol Prince's confidential adviser who had remained behind, supervised their drill by their red-faced, silver-capped war captains.

Too, the spies who had watched the Prince of Persia and the Prince of India had made report to their master who was now on his way to the mysterious and most extraordinary Island of Wak, so called for a reason lost in the mists of antiquity—a reason to which even that grandiose and ponderous Mandarin classic, "The Book of the Yellow Emperor," gives not the slightest clue.

The Prince and his retinue took ship from the Manchurian coast. Came two days' pitching and rolling and, if the truth be told, seasickness, as the ship bored through the turbulent grey-green channel. Then one morning the sun rose in the East behind lowering clouds that were like mountains of gold-glowing lava. There was a gossamer fog which lifted sud-

denly, and minute by minute the Island of Wak peaked more sharply into the focus. Nearer and nearer it came until the Prince of the Mongols, seated on top deck, could see all the details.

Seen from the distance, the place looked like some delicate and exquisite Chinese painting drawn and brushed by a master-craftsman of the Ming dynasty. There were charming pagodas, tinkling with silver and porcelain bells; quivering bamboos; towering pine trees; waters eddying round a tangle of tall reeds; narrow rivers spanned by audaciously curved bridges. There were vivid bits of life: a peasant tilling his small patch of soil; a maiden sitting in a garden and weaving brocade at the loom; a scholar in front of his house, pouring over a learned scroll; an old man bearing a great bundle of fire wood; a fisherman rocking in his skiff—and, hovering over all, the serenity of quiet, intense, never tiring labor which is the message and the blessing of the Chinese.

For Wak had been colonized by the Chinese. After the manner of their race, not through the sword but through work and industry, they had

vanquished the original inhabitants: Tunguz tribesmen. The latter had died. Today there was only one of them left, Yuqluq, the medicineman to whom the Prince had sent word of his coming and who even now was climbing up the ship's ladder.

The Prince gave a little exclamation of disgust when he saw the medicine-man. For Yuqluq looked like a savage. He was tall and thin and dark. His hair, dyed red with henna, had been carefully trained in the shape of an immense helmet, and was ornamented with antelope horns. From his shoulders floated a magnificent cape of hawks' feathers. He wore many-coiled brass-wire anklets which reached from his feet to his knees, and broad brass bracelets on both his forearms. His naked body was smeared with a bizarre design of ochre and crimson clay, while his face was tattooed to resemble a devil mask. Innumerable necklaces of beads were strung around his throat. From his girdle hung a large collection of witch charms, which fluttered and rattled with every gesture and movement; and, dangling from a tall stick in his right hand, was something

which resembled a dried cocoanut, but which on closer inspection turned out to be a human head, carefully smoke-cured, preserved, and shriveled, after the bones had been removed.

An unsavory savage. But there was something ominous, something wildly superb in the poise of his tall body. And a few moments later it appeared that, whatever the outer man, the inner man was both shrewd and fearless.

"I heard word, Yuqluq," said the Prince, "of a certain dread fruit which you possess—a fruit which holds instantaneous power over life and death."

"You have been truly told," replied the medicine-man.

"I want this fruit. Bring it."

"No!"

"No . . . ?" The Prince raised an eyebrow. "You mean—you refuse to obey?"

"Exactly!" Yuqluq crossed his arms over his broad chest.

"You realize," purred the Prince, "what refusal means?"

"Death?"

"Indeed, dog! But—ah"—with a thin,

cruel smile—"slow death—death both lengthy and humorous! Humorous—I mean—from the onlooker's point of view."

"I am not afraid of death. Nor am I afraid of tortures."

Both men were silent. They stared at each other, like two fencers. Finally the Prince inclined his head.

"You spoke the truth," he said. "You are not afraid. To kill you would be useless. To torture you would be a waste of time. On the other hand, I want the magic fruit. I need it. I intend to have it. Tell me—how much do you want?"

"The fruit is not for sale. Gold is of no value to me."

"I shall make you Duke of Wak."

"I do not care for titles. I"—Yuqluq drew himself proudly—"I am a medicine-man! What greater title is there?"

"Mine own—possibly," smiled the Prince.

"Possibly!" came the arrogant rejoinder.

The Prince laughed.

"By the Buddha!" he said. "I like you!"

"And I like you, O Majesty!"

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And both men meant it. Both men laughed.

"You might give me the fruit for love of me?" suggested the Mongol.

"I do not love you enough—for that."

"Then—how can I pay you? What can I do for you? All men have their price. What is yours? What do you want?"

"I want a wife," came Yuqluq's simple reply.

"I want children—preferably men-children. For I am the last of my race. With me—unless I have children—the Tunguz nation is finished."

"Well—then—why don't you marry?"

"There is no Tunguz woman left in all the world."

"Marry a Chinese girl. Some of them are quite pretty—and all of them are obedient."

The medicine-man's eyes flashed with hate.

"These Chinese pigs look down on me," he said. "They will not give me one of their women in marriage."

"I shall give orders. You will have a dozen Chinese wives if you like."

"Majesty," replied Yuqluq, "it would do no good. You can order—yes—and they will obey."

But they will treat me as they have always done, and my wife, though of their own blood, will be an outcast amongst them."

"What can we do?" puzzled the Prince.

"There is only one way."

"Name it!"

"You are the Great Lord, the Great Dragon, the Supreme and Exquisite Majesty! If one of your own blood should become my wife, even the proudest of these Chinese pigs will kowtow to me and kiss my feet!"

The Prince of the Mongols was silent. He was not angry at the other's demands. Why—he smiled thinly—his father had been a much-married potentate. Twelve wives he had; seventeen sons; and nine daughters. He himself—"for reasons of peace and political unity," as he expressed it—had had his brothers beheaded when he had mounted the throne. But he had permitted his sisters to survive. For they were valuable pawns, articles of political trade, to be given as wives to chiefs and khans and minor princelings who desired the shining glory of imperial connection. And right here was a case in point!

He turned to the medicine-man.

"My youngest sister will make you an excellent wife," he said, "and you will doubtless make me an excellent brother-in-law—ah—a generous brother-in-law."

"Yes," smiled Yuqluq. "Within the hour I will bring you the magic fruit of life and death."

"Harmonious and exquisite thanks!"

They went ashore.

A few miles inland were vast ruins where once, before the peaceful Chinese invasion, had stood the main temple—rather a cluster of temples—of the Tunguz tribesmen. The ruins' sinister reputation was such that the very Chinese, most practical and irreligious of men, refused to convert the acres into fields or building-sites, and even to set foot on them.

Here a curved stairway led into a valley.

Following Yuqluq, the Prince of the Mongols picked his way carefully down; for there were large cracks and fissures between the marble steps where fig and banyan seeds had found foothold amongst the slabs and, through the

centuries, had grown into huge, gnarled trees that heaved the stone work apart like so much sand a child piles up at play.

Finally they arrived at the bottom of the valley.

“Careful!” admonished Yuqluq. “Step gently. For the snake folk live here in peace.”

The very next moment a low, thick, unmistakable hiss came almost directly from beneath the Prince’s feet. At once his sword flashed free and descended with a steely swish. The head of the snake landed on a flat rock to the left with a dull thud.

In the middle of the ruins there had once been an artificial lake dammed by stone embankments. But the dams had shivered and burst. The lake had risen. In the lower dip of the valley, scarlet-necked cranes had their homes in the half submerged arcades of the temples while blunt-nosed, pig-eyed crocodiles nuzzled the carved, broken pillars.

They walked up a steep street where wild peacocks strutted proudly on the shivered house tops, spreading their tails under the golden splendor of the sun, and where countless blue

pigeons with yellow topknots whirred and cooed. A little mongoose sat in the empty window of a deserted house, staring at them, and scratching its tiny, furry ears.

It seemed that here, in the city of the dead Tunguz race, the world had stood still, that it was still standing still to hear the centuries race past on dusty, purposeless wings.

On they walked, past deserted pavilions, past broken screens of fretted pink and green marble, half buried in the dirt, past brass-studded gates whose hinges were eaten out with rust, past walls plumed and choked with grass, past little shrines which were gems of tracery and inlay, past masses of luxuriant plant life. For trees were everywhere. They grew between the square, massive stones of the pavement, splitting them open like ripe cocoanuts.

The medicine-man stopped in front of a large building springing out of the scarped rock.

"We have arrived," he said. "Here my ancestors, before they were drowned in the swill of these Chinese pigs, prayed to their gods and brewed their ancient craft. Here I, the last of my race, having inherited the craft of my ances-

tors, fashioned with my own hands and brain and soul the magic fruit which kills—and which grants life. No”—as the Mongol Prince was about to follow him across the threshold—“wait here. It is not safe inside.”

He entered the temple and returned a few minutes later, carrying, tied to a long bamboo pole, a small object.

“I give it to you, Majesty,” he said solemnly. “May it mean death to your enemies! May it mean life again—renewed life springing from my loins—to my race when your sister, my future wife, shall bear me children! May they be men-children! May they be as many as there are hairs on my head!”

The Prince of the Mongols took the pole and looked at the magic fruit. It was round, the size and shape of an apple, but made of a substance which he did not recognize, combining the shimmer and glisten of polished gold, the soft texture of Mandarin velvet, and the icy chill of frozen snow. Its color was of mingled milk flames beneath the golden shimmer, and it exhaled a strong, cloying scent.

“How do I use it?” asked the Prince.

Then the medicine-man showed him that on one side of the apple was a tiny green point, like the point of a needle, and on the other side a similar point, but purple in color.

"The touch of the green point, when it scratches the skin with a quick, criss-cross motion, means death. The touch of the purple point, applied with the same motion, means life."

"Life"—demanded the Prince—"to whoever has died—and of whatever causes?"

"No. It cannot restore life to those who have died by the sword, by wounds, or mutilations. But it does give life to those who have died of an ailment or of poison—any poison at all—or by the touch and scratch of the apple's green point. Come!" laughed the medicine-man. "Let us put this darling little apple to the test!"

They left the ruins and returned to the harbor where, at the water's edge, a Chinese was fishing. The man was intent upon his catch. He did not hear the footsteps behind him, nor the Prince's whisper:

"Here is your chance, Yuqluq!"

The latter moved noiselessly toward the fisherman; he reached out with the pole and, quickly, suddenly, touched and scratched the man's naked shoulder with the green point of the magic fruit.

The Chinese felt the scratch; imagined that a mosquito had bitten him; raised his hand to slap it away. Then, with his hand still in mid-air, he dropped as if struck by lightning. He lay there, stark, stiff, lifeless, while, gradually, as the Prince of the Mongols looked on, the body became bloated and turned a terrible, grey-green color, as though he had been killed by bubonic plague.

"Ah"—smiled the Prince calmly—"one less Chinese in the world!"

"Not yet!" laughed Yuqluq.

Again he reached out with the pole; again scratched the fisherman's shoulder, but this time with the purple point. And at once the grey-green color of the skin changed to a healthy, ruddy flush, the bloated body assumed its ordinary proportions, and the man sat up nowise hurt, except for a great fear which had swept

over his soul which caused him to run away as fast as his legs would carry him.

"The greatest rarity in the world," admitted the Prince of Mongols. "There is no doubt of it. More precious than the Prince of Persia's flying carpet, more marvelous than the Indian's crystal! And yet . . ." he slurred; paused.

"And yet—what?" asked the medicine-man.

"Will Zobeid think so?"

"How can she help herself, Majesty?"

There is beauty and romance in a rug that can cut through the air like a swallow; beauty and romance, too, in a crystal globe that mirrors the motley scenes of life. But is there beauty in this—a thing which gives life—yes—but which also gives death? Zobeid is a woman, soft-hearted. The thought of this grim thing might make her shudder. Perhaps she will fear and hate it—and fear and hate the giver."

"Decidedly," came Yuqluq's insolent answer. "It is lucky for you that I am going to be a member of your family. My brain will be of great help to you through the years to come. Majesty"—he lowered his voice—"use this magic apple!"

"Use it? What do you mean?"

"Send a confidential messenger to Bagdad as quickly as you can. Doubtless the Princess has amongst her servants one whose hand can be greased with gold?"

"Yes. There is Fount-in-the-Forest, a Mongol slave girl who wishes me well."

"Good. Send her word to poison her mistress."

"Poison her?" Even the Prince's tough Mongol hide squirmed at the suggestion. "What for? What is a dead woman to me?"

Yuqluq smiled as he might at a babbling child.

"Have her poisoned slowly," he continued, "so that by the time you reach Bagdad she will be at every door of death. Then you, with the help of this magic apple, will bring her back to life. And there will be no argument as to which of the three of the Princes has brought back the greatest rarity. Life itself? Is there a finer gift on earth?"

The Prince laughed.

"Exquisite and harmonious thanks," he replied. "I am glad indeed to have you for a

brother-in-law. Your time and talents are wasted in the Island of Wak. As soon as I return from Bagdad with my bride, I shall appoint you Chief Judge of the Imperial Circuit Court, Prime Minister, Moderator of the Buddhistic Faith, Supervisor of the Imperial Eunuchs, and a Knight Commander of the Order of the Five-Clawed Dragon."

That same afternoon a messenger was sent to Bagdad with the necessary instructions, while the Prince with the rest of his retinue returned to the mainland on the next day. They traveled quickly, by relays of horses and camels, toward the rendezvous with the other two Princes at Terek-el-Bey. For it was now drawing close to the end of the fifth moon, and there was not much time to spare.



CHAPTER VIII



CHAPTER VIII

AHMED, too, was traveling swiftly; traveling East, always East, toward the rising sun of the world, the rising sun of his soul. The end of the fifth moon, he said to himself, and his goal was not yet in sight. His feet were stepping down the hard, long road. His soul followed where his feet led. Deep streams of longing swept over him as with the force of a great wind. A journey of the body, this; but also a journey of the spirit. Adventures of the body; but also high, clanking adventures of the spirit.

Farther and farther, each day, he drew away from the earth as he had known it heretofore; from life as he had lived it heretofore. Deeper and deeper he advanced into a gigantic, cosmic fairyland of which, gradually, he was beginning to feel the inner meaning of its symbolical expression and lessons and secrets. And yet,

leaving behind him all formerly known and realized experiences, entering upon this vast and unknown realm of the spirit, he was conscious of a greater, subtler energy than he had ever known before; was commencing to see himself whole, measured against a more spacious scale of time—a scale of time where a month might be a fleeting, unimportant second, and a thousand years pass into the shadow like a single day.

Yet, straight through, the thought of Zobeid never left him. It was in his brain like a strange, wild ecstasy that suffused him utterly—like the sweet and facile running of a brook over a mountainside.

But—came the doubt—would he ever reach back to her?

Five months were already gone, never to be regained, and he was beginning to be afraid of Fate, to doubt the outcome; was longing for resignation.

Resignation to Fate!

And he remembered what the tree in the Enchanted Garden had told him: that he would have to consult the Old Man of the Mid-

night Sea—the Sea of Resignation to Fate.

So he traveled on.

The valley below him was filled with mist. Above the mist, the sky vaulted tight and steel-blue, clear but for a cloud bank of a sickly, olive-green color that stretched across from North to South; stretched there like a solid obstacle, daring Ahmed to hurdle across and into the unknown. He half turned, looking over his shoulder. There, in back of him, the mountains rose and surged superbly. They sang there during the day, and at night whispered the praises of Allah to the hiving, green stars. On the other side of these mountains was life as he had lived it. He was going away from it now, into the unknown, the valley that, suffused with the sun's red and gold flames, turned radiant through its mist of running tints.

Something down there in that misty valley urged him on; it caught at his soul with a deep and puissant suction. He hurried—hurried toward the fringe of ultimate vision and understanding.

Gradually, as he descended the valley, the mist lifted. It vanished. He crossed a rhodo-

dendron forest, purple with clustering blossoms. The sun rays trembled in the leaves like wavering music in a wind of night. Very suddenly, as he turned the corner of a gigantic rock, he saw the valley cleft in two by a shimmering surface: a great lake offering its steaming expanse to the fiery face of the sun. There stretched miles upon miles of flat, monotonous beach with an occasional, grey, dry bush, like a Chinese water-color, silhouetting the far verge above the yellow surf. Farther to the West was a league-long tongue of sand whence slender, tufted jets of palms etched the vacant, azure spaces. There was not a sign of life; not even a zумming of sun-drunk insects, nor a circling and winging of birds; only, a few feet from shore, a very old, white-bearded man was rocking in a frail boat, rowing aimlessly with a single, oval-bladed oar, hardly moving.

Lonely it seemed; terribly lonely; just as if the world had come to an end here, and there was no beyond, no future. The loneliness invaded Ahmed's soul. He needed the consolation, the reassurance of the human voice. So he called out to the old man in the boat:

“Hey, there! Hey, there!”

No answer; and Ahmed raised his voice a shrill octave:

“Hey, there! Say something, will you? Hey, there—you in the boat—old white-beard! Be you Moslem or unbeliever, man or ghost?”

Still the man remained silent, kept on aimlessly rowing. And Ahmed, prey to the huge loneliness, sat down near the shore, tired in body and soul. The sky above him blushed rose, trembled, flamed, sank to the booming of oncoming evening. A stray wind stirred and fluttered the watery vapors that sheeted the surface of the lake.

“Oh, Allah!” prayed Ahmed. “Teach me resignation to Fate—Fate which is the breath of Thy Divine Will!”

Sleep overcame him.

When he awakened, it was night; night, complete, swathing, pitch-black, with only a single elfin wedge of moonlight that outlined sharply the old man who was still aimlessly rowing his frail boat—seemed not to have moved as much as an inch. Then, all at once, the conviction

came to Ahmed that this was the Old Man of the Midnight Sea, and that this lake was none other than the Sea of Resignation to Fate. He rose. Again, cupping his mouth with his hands, he called out to the old man, this time with a peremptory spice in his voice of challenge and impatience:

“Are you the Old Man of the Midnight Sea?”

Slowly the man in the boat turned his head.

“You have guessed it!” the laconic, slightly ironic reply drifted across the water.

“Come over here to me!” cried Ahmed.

“Why should I?”

“Because I need you.”

“Many need me. All need me. Only four, since the beginning of Allah’s creation, were those who did not need me. One was Moses—on Him peace! The second was the Lord Buddha—on Him peace! The third was Jesus—on Him peace! And the fourth was the Prophet Mohammed—on Him peace!”—and the Old Man turned his back on Ahmed and attended once more to his aimless rowing.

“But”—cried Ahmed, more loudly—“I can-

not do without you! I am a poor, human soul in trouble!"

"Why did you not say so the first time?" said the old man, rather ill-naturedly. "I am coming." The boat moved, quickly made shore. "Come aboard, Thief of Bagdad!" he invited.

"Oh——" asked Ahmed, surprised, as he stepped over the gunwale. "You know me?"

"Of course I do. I know everybody. Am I not Kismet—Fate itself? Look out!"—as Ahmed shifted in his seat. "Have a care! Do not rock the boat! That has always been the chief trouble with you"—he grumbled—"all your life! You are forever rocking the boat. No, no!" as Ahmed moved again—"do keep quiet! I am having a hard enough time as it is, trying to hold this boat steady, with all those uncounted millions of foolish, querulous, pulling, whining mortals always challenging Fate and holding back my boat with their eternal, silly complaints! All right"—as Ahmed sat still—"and now tell me: What exactly do you want?"

"I want the magic silver chest."

"Help yourself to it. I am not keeping you from getting it, am I?"

"Well—but where is it?"

The Old Man of the Midnight Sea pointed at the black, coiling, swirling waters. "Down there!" he said.

Ahmed leaned over the side of the boat and looked.

"I cannot see a thing," he replied.

"Naturally not. The box is a hundred fathoms deep—at the very bottom of the lake."

"Then—how can I get it?"

"You will have to dive for it. You will have to jump into the Sea of Resignation to Fate."

Ahmed gave a little involuntary shudder; and the Old Man of the Midnight Sea took compassion on him.

"Thief of Bagdad," he said, "be not afraid. Everything, sooner or later, must go down into the waters of this lake. All men and women and children—even the unborn children. The moon goes down there every morning when it is waning, and the sun every night when it has set on earth. At the bottom of the lake you will find a cave—a cave made of the shimmer-

ing, opal tears of man's grief, with windows made of the milk-white crystals and bright-green emeralds of man's laughter, and a gleaming red door, like an immense ruby, made of the heart's blood of all those who have loved and who have suffered and sacrificed greatly for the sake of their love. If your own love for Zobeid be great enough, your resignation to God's will sincere enough, you will find this door. You will open it. And, beyond the threshold, you will see the magic silver box."

"What does the box contain?" demanded Ahmed.

"A very precious treasure. The most precious treasure in the world. Some men call it happiness. But emperors, fools, and wise men call it honor. It is the same thing. By the way," he added as Ahmed stood up, about to dive into the lake—"the magic box is wrapped in the Cloak of Invisibility. If I were you I would bring the cloak along, too. It will come in handy in your future adventures."

"How do you know?" asked Ahmed.

"Naturally I know, O fool!" chuckled the

old man. "Did I not tell you that I am Kismet itself?"

"I beg your pardon," Ahmed murmured, crestfallen but polite; and, the next second, he curved into the water in an audacious leap.

A splash—circles widening, breaking, dissolving—smoothness and indifference again where the waters closed over him—and down there, as he bored his way head foremost through the hundred fathoms, a myriad flecks of glittering gold.

He found the cave without much trouble. It shone like an immense jewel, opal and milk-white and emerald-green and ruby-red. He walked up to the door that was made of the heart's blood of lovers who had suffered and sacrificed greatly because of their love; and his own love was like a sharp scimitar to the clutch of his hand, his resignation to the sendings of Fate, growing, steadily growing, was like a stout buffalo-hide shield to his elbow.

He laughed fearlessly, carelessly, when from rocks and clumps of coral at the bottom of the lake rose slimy, huge octopi that writhed about him with countless, sucking, pulpy tentacles.

The sword of his love cut their bloated bodies to pieces. The shield of his resignation guarded him against their attack. The strength of his love opened for him the blood-red door. The vision of his resignation pierced for him the cloak of invisibility in which the silver box was wrapped.

He stuffed the cloak—it was as light as thistledown—into his waist shawl—and picked up the magic box. It was small and square. It did not look much like anything precious: just a plain silver box, oxidized by the water, and neither carved nor ornamented.

He rose again through the hundred fathoms, swimming upward steadily, with a full, keen stroke of his powerful shoulders, until he reached the surface of the lake.

He looked about him.

The Old Man of the Midnight Sea had disappeared. So had the boat. It was day. The sun shimmered down with a thousand splintering, golden lances; and, as he swam ashore, he saw there a splendid, snow-white horse, a horse with two immense silver wings, that pawed the

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ground impatiently with dainty feet and neighed when it saw Ahmed.

Ahmed thought and acted at the same fraction of a second. He jumped on the horse's back.

"Off with you!" he cried. "Carry me West—across the Enchanted Garden, the Valley of the Monsters, the Hill of Eternal Fire, and the Valley of the Seven Temptations!"

And the horse spread its silver wings and rose through the air—and we may mention here that the Arab chronicle from which this tale is taken refers to this horse as "the Winged Horse of Imagination."

"For," says this chronicle, "what is love if not imagination? Do we not always imagine the loved one's body and soul to be the most beautiful on earth? Such, doubtless, were Ahmed's thoughts about Zobeid. Nor was he the only one. By the teeth of the Prophet—on Him the salute!—I myself, the scribe of this tale, met in Samarkand a woman, seventy years old, stupid, and who looked exactly like a well-fed pig. Yet I met a man in Samarkand who swore upon the Koran that this woman was so beau-

tiful that she caused the moon to blush with envy and jealousy. Love is indeed as blind as a puppy-dog!"

But, if love is as blind as a puppy-dog, how blind then is conceit? Conceit of three Princes of Asia, meeting at the little oasis of Terek el-Bey, not far from Bagdad!

Of the three, the Persian's conceit was the most childish. He waddled about the oasis—as the Mongol Prince whispered to a confidential Manchu clerk of his retinue—"looking for all the world exactly like a cross-breed between a hog and a peahen, having inherited the former's bloated, exaggerated, excessive, indecent paunch and the latter's superb, if quaint, vanity."

Indeed that morning, with the help of various servants, slaves, eunuchs, majordomos, coiffeurs, perfumers, dressers, barbers, masseurs, slipper-bearers, turban-twisters, valets, color experts, silk experts, velvet experts, skin experts, gland experts, manicurists, chiropodists, chiropractors, and jewelers, the obese little descendant of tough-thewed Iranian war-

riors had adorned himself as became a Prince and a bridegroom.

They had carefully shaved, painted, and powdered his cheeks and chin, except for cute little sidewhiskers that curled like question marks. They had trimmed, pointed, waxed, and scented his mustache. They had arched his eyebrows by plucking out the fine hairs around them with tweezers. They had dyed his hair a gorgeous indigo-blue, training two long, curly lovelocks to hang gracefully down either side of his face like a handsome frame to a handsome painting. They had enlarged the pupils of his eyes by using an infusion of belladonna. They had heightened the color of his lips with the help of betel-nut juice. They had whitened his plump neck by a mysterious Egyptian cosmetic worth its weight in gold. They had reddened the tips of his ears by squeezing them. They had caused his teeth to shine by rubbing copper powder into the roots. They had pointed and gilt his finger-nails and toe-nails. They had stained the palms of his hands and the soles of his feet a delightful and delicate rose with Turkish henna. They had

spent seven hours in twisting about his bullet-shaped head a silken turban, blending peach-red with apricot-yellow, sky-blue with sea-green, the whole adorned with a cunning design of bleeding, interlacing lovers' hearts. They had robed his stout body with simple, almost severe magnificence, in a robe of cloth-of-gold embroidered all over with white and yellow diamonds and opening over another robe of the same chaste magnificence, made of cloth-of-silver striped with purple and rose-madder and embroidered over the heart with a design of uncut emeralds that spelled out: "I love thee, Zobeid!" in both the Persian and the Arabic language. His jewels—finger-rings and toe-rings and ear-rings, pendants and necklaces and bracelets and turban aigrettes—were the pick of his treasury; and having never used a weapon in all his life except knife and fork, perhaps occasionally a toothpick, he had hung about his substantial person a number of wicked-looking weapons.

For his chief barber had told him:

"O Great Shah-in-Shah! O Lion of Allah! It has been my experience in life—a life," he

had smirked, "not untrodden by narrow, dainty, scented feet of many women—that the ladies admire a warrior, a hero, a clanking, rattling, bullying, swaggering fighting man!"

He had added:

"*Wah!* The magic, flying carpet? You will hardly need it. Your face and figure alone—without mentioning your soul—are the greatest, rarest gift in the world! Just look into the mirror and convince yourself!"

And the Persian had looked into the mirror—and had been convinced.

The Indian Prince's conceit, while matching the other's, was more simple, more stolid and hard. He was cousin to all the gods. In him Ganesha, the god of wisdom, was reincarnate, as was Shridat, the god of fortune, and Maya, the goddess of illusion.

Having been rather a gay blade during his bachelor years, fond of wine, woman, and song, he had given oath that morning that, as soon as he was married and returned from his honeymoon trip, he would be a model husband and model Rajah.

"By Doorga, the Great Mother!" he had ex-

claimed. "By the Father of the Elephant's Trunk! I give solemn oath that hereafter I shall turn over a new leaf! Every day of my life I shall perform the proper duties of a Rajah as ordered in the Vedas. I shall rise before daybreak and finish my ablutions! I shall worship the gods, and do obeisance to the Brahmins! I shall not permit my wife, the Princess Zobeid, to contradict me! I shall listen to her advice, and then I shall go and do the opposite! I shall judge my people according to the Shastras and the Laws of Manu, keeping in subjection lust, anger, folly, avarice, drunkenness, and pride! I shall not yield to my desire for dancing, singing, playing on musical instruments, gaming, and the chase! I shall refrain from sleep during daytime, from molesting men of worth and women of virtue and from useless traveling! I shall live such an exemplary life that future historians will refer to me as the Father of my country and the Grand Old Man of Hindustan! And in their books these historians shall devote a couple of pages, perhaps an appendix, to the sweetness and beauty of the Princess Zobeid,

whom I graciously permitted to share my throne and my life! Ho, Doorga! Ho, Devi! Ho, Smashana Kali!”

But it was the Mongol Prince's conceit which was most justified by fact.

For messengers, traveling post-haste from Bagdad, had brought him news that Fount-in-the-Forest had done her work well. She had succeeded in giving slow poison to her mistress. Even now the latter was on the threshold of death.

The greatest physicians, sorcerers, faith healers, apothecaries, and leeches of Bagdad, Damascus, Constantinople, and Cairo had been summoned to her bedside. Moses Maimonides, the eminent Jewish philosopher and savant, had made the long journey East from the Moorish University of Cordova, where he lectured, to add his skill and sagacity; from Witeltsbach, thanks to the good offices of the Emperor of Germany, had come the famous Doctor Johannes Erasmus von Thunichtsgut, whose culture was so colossal that, besides being the greatest German physician, he spoke seven dead languages and not a single living

one; the Holy Father in Rome had despatched a saintly and sapient Franciscan monk, Padre Chrysostom, a wonderful exorcist who on three occasions had driven away the Devil by prayers and marvelous spells; and the Bourbons of France had sent *M. le docteur* Henri Toussaint Je-M'en-Moque, who hid his trenchant talents and penetrating perspicacity under mincing manners and a tremendous, white-powdered wig.

All these wise men had come, accompanied by hundreds of tutors, teachers, mathematicians, schoolmasters, preceptors, dry-nurses, mentors, docents, and assistants. They had brought immense quantities of drugs, pills, instruments, bandages, and scientific tomes. Arrived in Bagdad, they had examined Zobeid. Then, promptly, as is the habit of scientific gentlemen and mild, tolerant scholars the world over, they had disagreed with each other—some even with themselves—on every single, solitary point. They had argued and counter-argued, by inference and comparison, by revelation and tradition, by theories physical and metaphysical, analytical and synthetical, philo-

sophical and biological, rational and inspirational. Some, being gnostics, had seen in every experiment a hundred things which they did not see. Others, being agnostics, had refused to see what they did see. They had wound up by calling each other bad names:

“Fool!”

“Liar!”

“Charlatan!”

“Unscientific jackass!”

“Medicaster!”

“Humbug!”

“Quacksalver!”

“Sophist!”

“Dunce!”

“Unprincipled scoundrel!”

The insults had been as thick as pea-soup.

The German doctor had pulled the Frenchman's nose, and the latter had retaliated by drawing his rapier and painfully pinking the other in his generous stomach; and the Franciscan Padre had cursed Moses Maimonides by candle and book, while the Jew had repaid the compliment with black and cryptic curses from the Talmud and the Kabala.

All this had not been of the slightest help to the poor little Princess; and even now the people in the Caliph's palace were making ready for the last solemn rites—with the slave women wailing and beating their breasts; the death gongs sobbing like lost souls astray on the outer rim of Creation and the reed pipes shrieking their shrill, dismal plaint; with white-robed, green-turbaned Moslem priests chanting the liturgy; and with the smoke from a hundred ceremonial fires mounting to the sky, in thick streamers and hanging in ruddy, blood-shot clouds above the palace and telling to all Arabistan that one of the dynasty of Bagdad was returning to Allah.

All this the Prince of the Mongols knew; and there was hidden laughter in the words with which he turned to the Prince of Persia:

“And so, Great Shah-in-Shah, you imagine that this flying rug of yours is the greatest rarity on earth?”

“Imagine? By Allah and by Allah—I know it!” replied the other. He asked his servants to spread out the carpet. “Look! Consider

well! To travel through the air at one's will! Ah—to travel—travel . . .” He was waxing lyrical, as fat men will at the slightest provocation. “To travel! To see all the glorious, wondrous sights! Fragrant fields! Golden ribbons of rivers! Elegant pagodas! Mountains bee-black and lapis-blue! To travel—as I shall—side by side with the loved one, the darling, the apple of my eyes, my bride! Ah!”—addressing the Prince of India—“am I not right?”

“Quite right—in a way,” admitted the Indian, who, sure of his own success, could afford to be generous. “Traveling is a wonderful thing. My divine ancestors agree with you.” And, quoting from the words of Indra, the god of air:

“‘Indra is the friend of him who travels. Travel!

“‘For a traveler's legs are like branches in flower, and he who travels grows like the tree and gathers his own fruit. All his wrongs vanish, destroyed by the exertion on the roadside. Travel!

“‘The fortune of a man who sits, sits also;



Once more her cool white fingers fell athwart his arm.
(*"The Thief of Bagdad."*)

it rises when he rises; it sleeps when he sleeps; it moves well when he moves. Travel!

“‘A man who sleeps is like the Iron Age. A man who awakes is like the Bronze Age. A man who rises is like the Silver Age. A man who travels is like the Golden Age. Travel!’

“‘Look at the happiness of the sun who, traveling, never tires. Indra is the friend of him who travels. Travel!’ ”

“Yes,” continued the Indian. “To travel is delightful, and your flying rug is charming. Only”—he paused, smiled—“you were mistaken about your travel companion, your bride.”

“Mistaken?” echoed the Persian.

“Yes. For—I suppose—you referred to Zobeid?”

“Of course!”

“I am sorry,” went on the Prince of India. “But she cannot go with you!”

“And why not, pray?”

“Because she is going with me!”

“Oh,” demanded the Persian, sardonically, “is that so?”

“It is!” The Hindu held up the magic crys-

tal. "For this—this globe which I hold in my hand—is the greatest rarity on earth! Here you can read and see whatever, wherever anything is happening to anybody! A gift from Doorga herself—Doorga—that delightful, divine, six-armed relation of mine! Consider the marvel of it! A light from heaven! A fact of facile and fecund felicity! A thing of never-ending, ever-changing interest! A necessity for every married couple since, once and for all, it not only banishes every possibility of boredom, but permits the husband to see what his wife is doing when she is away—and vice versa!" He turned to the Mongol Prince. "Am I not right, O Great Dragon?"

The Mongol laughed disagreeably; replied as disagreeably:

"A wise Mandarin once remarked that to speak of honey will not make the mouth sweet. Personally I believe that you are both wrong. For I am sure that this little magic apple of mine will gain for me the hand of Zobeid if—ah—if she really means to keep her promise!"

"Eh?" came the Persian's surprised exclamation.

“You see,” continued the Mongol, “during these last seven moons I have often wondered if Zobeid was simply playing with us, sending us on impossible errands, since, after all, she is a woman, thus perverse by instinct—or if she intended keeping her pledge!”

The Indian looked at the Persian, doubt sprouting in his brain as rice sprouts under the spring monsoon:

“Does she mean to keep her pledge? I wonder!”

“I wonder!” echoed the Persian.

“Let us find out!” suggested the Mongol.

“How?”

“By consulting the magic crystal!” replied the Mongol.

“Why not?” agreed the Prince of India.

“Why not indeed?” echoed he of Persia and of the paunch.



CHAPTER IX



CHAPTER IX

CLOSELY they crowded about the magic globe, watching tensely, while the Prince of India implored Doorga to cause the blessed miracle to materialize. Long and ardent were his incantations to the goddess. Not that it was really necessary. All he would have had to do was to say to the crystal: "Show me Zobeid!" and it would have obeyed immediately. But he saw here a good opportunity to impress the other two with the social importance of his divine relations.

So he chanted:

"Thee I implore, O Doorga, O Smashana Kali, O Mighty Ruler of the Lower and the Upper Firmament! Behold, I am blood of thy blood and bone of thy bone! *Hari Bol! Hari Bol! Hari Bol!* Thou art the Mother of All the World, of men and women and cows and Brahmins, also of grief and laughter, of

light and darkness and the Zodiacal Twins! *Hari Bol! Hari Bol! Hari Bol!* Grant me one boon! Show to me, thy blood relation, and to these two Princes by my side, though they are mere dust-created mortals, what Zobeid is doing at this very moment! Ho, Doorga! Ho, Devi!”

At once the magic globe clouded. Breathlessly they waited for a few moments while something—perhaps the very spirit of Doorga—came out of the nowhere and wiped over the crystal with a soft, gigantic hand, causing a great coiling of motley colors and interlacing of lines and curves to pour down into the globe’s opaque depths, then to separate, to co-ordinate neatly, and to picture Zobeid’s apartment as in a miniature.

They saw every last detail of the apartment: the walls gemmed and inlaid; the floor of marble mosaic and covered with gold-threaded Teheran rugs; the carved Arab furniture; the great silver vases filled with a profusion of flowers, orange-flaming lilies, deep-red damask roses, and masses of feathery parrot-tulips of the most exotic shades, some purple, some

white-spotted and stained with crimson and violet, others so dark that they seemed black. They saw the immense dressing-table with everything arrayed in proper order: attar holders, rose-water bottles, prepared sandalwood powder, saffron, and pods of musk. They saw, clustering about Zobeid's couch, a great company of men and women, amongst them her father, the Caliph of Bagdad.

The latter had his head bent on his chest. His shoulders seemed to be shaking with great sobs.

"What is the matter?" asked the Mongol with well-simulated excitement.

Then, as though in answer to his question, in the miniature of the globe the Caliph turned. They saw tears streaming down his face; and, as the crowd about the couch drew aside, they saw the Princess stretched out, pale, hardly breathing—on the point of death, there was no doubt of it.

Perhaps for the first time in his life, an idea not suggested by others popped into the Persian's brain.

“Quick!” he said, stepping on the magic rug. “Come with me! Let us fly to Bagdad! We shall be there within the hour!”

“Ah!” sighed the Indian, “to celebrate the death rites!”

“Not at all! Has not our eminent colleague from Mongolia the mysterious apple which holds the secret of life and of death? Perhaps he will be able to save Zobeid—for me!”

“No! For me!” interrupted the Hindu.

“For myself! Just for myself personally!” came the Mongol’s unspoken thought as he joined the other two on the rug.

“*Hari Bol! Hari Bol!*” shouted the Indian.

“Fly! Fly away, O magic rug!” cried the Persian.

“To the west—quickly!” commanded the Mongol.

The rug rose from the ground and cut rapidly through the air toward Bagdad, while down below, on the road between the latter place and Terek el-Bey, in field and village and desert and hamlet, the excitement and consternation of the people who looked up and saw the won-

drous flying carpet, peaked to a hysterical pitch.

Hundreds fainted with fright.

Hundreds prostrated themselves and prayed to Allah and the Prophet Mohammed:

"Praise be to God, the Lord of the Worlds! The Compassionate, the Merciful, the All-Merciful, the All-Understanding! Thee we worship, and Thee we ask for help! Guide us in the straight way, the way of those to whom Thou art gracious; not of those upon whom is Thy wrath nor of the erring!" The prayer was everywhere.

"The Day of Judgment is here!" shouted a Dervish. "Behold—up there flieth the Archangel Gabriel, calling the souls to gather before Allah's throne!"

"Allah!"

"Allah!"

Steadily the excitement grew.

Camels broke their halter-ropes and stampeded. Horses followed suit. Dogs became mad and bit stray human legs. Cats bristled their hair and scratched and hissed.

Seven old men and nine old women died with fear.

Nineteen small children became ill with colic.

A notorious drunkard gave oath that never again would he let fermented liquor touch his lips. A notorious Armenian usurer gave oath that never again would he charge over ninety-nine per cent compound interest a month. A notorious Greek banker gave oath that never again would he lie away his honor for the sake of oppressing the widows and the orphans. A notorious Jewish broker gave oath that never again would he cheat the simple Moslem villagers by palming off bad coins on them. Indeed, it was claimed later on that the flying rug did more toward the moral reform of certain foreign elements in Arabistan and the whole of Islam than a thousand laws and a thousand painful bastinados.

But if the people below were frightened, so was at least one of the magic carpet's passengers.

For, earlier in the morning, the Prince of Persia had breakfasted well though not wisely

on half a stuffed goose, a large raisin cake drowned in whipped cream, a bottle of scented Shiraz wine, and a fine dish of prawns; and the jerking, rolling, sidewise motion of the rug as it sailed through the ether was conducive neither to his peace of soul nor to his peace of stomach. He groaned; shuddered; felt faint; turned a delicate pea-green; and he would have fallen overboard had not the Prince of India lent him a helping hand.

He was glad when, an hour later, the spires and roofs and painted domes of Bagdad came into sight, and when the rug flew low, entered the palace grounds, and at last sailed down the curved stairway into the apartment of the Princess.

Here, too, was excitement; surprise; consternation; fear; questions:

“What?”

“Where?”

“Whence?”

“Why?”

“How?”

“Well—we are here, aren’t we?” replied the Prince of Persia, his pride overcoming his sea-

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sickness as he and the other two stepped down from the rug. "Here—to save the Princess!"

More hectic questions:

"What?"

"How?"

"When?"

Only the Moslem priests continued chanting their sobing, wailing liturgy since, given their vocation, they considered death much more important than life:

"Urhum yah Rubb! Khalkat, elathi ent khalakta; urhum el-mezakin, wah el-juaanin, wah el-ayranin! Urhum—urhum y'Allah . . ."

But the Mongol Prince interrupted their chant with chilly words:

"You are previous, my saintly friends. The Princess is about to regain life!"

"Kismet has decided that she must die!" exclaimed one of the priests.

"Maybe!" smiled the Mongol. "But I have decided that she must live!"

"How?" demanded the Caliph. "I have consulted the greatest physicians and scientists and professors . . ."

"And similar learned jackasses, I know," cut in the Mongol arrogantly.

"Sir!" cried the German professor, turning livid with rage.

"Sir!" echoed the French professor.

"Sir! How dare you?" echoed the other savants; and for once it seemed that they were thoroughly in agreement.

But the Mongol laughed.

"Behold this apple!" he said, holding high the magic fruit. "The greatest rarity on earth! With its help Zobeid will live again!"

It was a lucky thing that he was a Mongol, thus practical, rather coarse, basing his life on facts. For had he been Arab or Hindu or Persian, he would first have gone through half a hundred proper rites, would have observed due etiquette, and by the time he was ready to use the apple the Princess would have been dead for good. But, being a Mongol, a rough Man on Horseback in spite of his gorgeous Chinese robes, he calmly brushed aside learned men, philosophers, dry-nurses, slave girls, priests, sorcerers and eunuchs; stepped up to the couch; slipped an arm about the Princess'

shoulder without any ceremony; and scratched her slightly with the apple's purple point.

The effect was instantaneous. Zobeid sat up, her cheeks a healthy pink, her eyes clear and bright, her breath coming regularly.

"A miracle!" cried the Caliph, rushing up to her and kissing her hand.

"A miracle!" shouted they all; and so the death chant changed to a chant of thanksgiving while the Mongol Prince, using the excitement as he might a cloak, stepped up to Fount-in-the-Forest.

"Harmonious and exquisite thanks!" he whispered. "You have done your work well. I am grateful. Perhaps at a future date, after having been married to Zobeid for a few years, I shall reward you most splendidly by elevating you to the gorgeous rank, position, and title of my Number-Two-Wife. But—first of all—I must marry the Number-One-Wife—Zobeid!"

"Surely," replied Fount-in-the-Forest, "there can be no doubt of it now?"

"There should not be. But there might be. I believe in defeating Fate by preparing for

the worst. For once my father told me that it is better for us to breakfast upon our enemies than to have our enemies dine upon us. So slip out of the palace, find Wong K'ai, and tell him to hold my warriors in readiness. If I need them, I shall give a signal."

"What signal?"

"Three times I shall flutter my handkerchief from the window over there. Then let them attack town and palace with full, ruthless force. Ah!"—his narrow-lidded, oblique eyes gleamed, his teeth showed in a white, wolfish snarl, he was suddenly the Mongol, the rider, the raider—"let them spare neither man nor woman nor child! Let the ancient boast of our race come true—that grass will never grow again where once our horses' feet have trod!"

"Listen is obey, O Great Dragon!" said Fount-in-the-Forest triumphantly; and she kowtowed deeply, and left the palace to find Wong K'ai.

The Mongol turned and joined the other two Princes who were busy answering the Caliph's questions as to the Why and Wherefore of the extraordinary happening.

"I am grateful—so grateful!" exclaimed the happy father, fondling his daughter's hand. "Grateful to all of you!"

"Do not forget that most of your gratitude belongs to this little magic apple!" suggested the Mongol. "With its help I restored life to your charming daughter. Life! The greatest gift in the world! Ah!"—he bowed deeply before the Caliph—"the greatest rarity in the world! I found it! Be pleased, O delightful Zobeid, to accept it as a present!" He gave the magic fruit to Zemzem, the Princess' faithful Arab slave girl; and once more addressed the Caliph: "I have succeeded! I found and brought back the most marvelous treasure on earth! And now, according to your and your daughter's pledge, I claim her as my own—my bride—my wife!"

"Fair and just!" admitted the Caliph of Bagdad; but his words as well as Zobeid's exclamation of horror and consternation were swallowed in the Indian's angry:

"Why—the pretensions of this Mongol are absolutely preposterous! Saved Zobeid's life, did he? By Shiva! There is hardly a Brah-

min or holy fakir in Hindustan who is not familiar with *Sanjivnividya*—the science of restoring the dead to life!”

“Pardon me,” sneered the Mongol, “but why did you not use this marvelous science?”

“Partly because, in my excitement and grief, I did not happen to think of it; and partly because, knowing that Zobeid would marry me, I did not wish to rob you of the glory of having cured—ah!”—he smiled like the cat that has stolen the cream—“the future Queen of India. For I claim Zobeid’s hand. Here”—as he gave the magic crystal to Zemzem—“is the greatest rarity on earth! Without its help we would not have known of Zobeid’s terrible plight! She is mine—mine—mine!”

“There is something in what you say,” admitted the Caliph. He turned to his daughter. “Zobeid, I really believe that he is right and that . . .”

“Wait a moment! Just wait a moment!” cut in the Prince of Persia. “A fiddlestick for magic globe and magic apple! Valuable—I grant. Also interesting. But it was my magic flying carpet which brought us here in time to

save the Princess' life. Here"—as he spread the rug in front of the couch—"is the greatest treasure, the rarest gift in the Lord Allah's Creation! By its token I claim your daughter's hand, O Caliph of all the Faithful!"

"By the honor of my beard," said the latter. "The Persian, too, is right!"

"But, father dear! I am an obedient daughter. Still—I cannot marry the three of them, can I?"

"Hardly!" admitted the Caliph.

"Then—what shall I do!"

"You are mine!" cried the Indian.

"Mine!" exclaimed the Persian.

"Mine! Mine own!" growled the Mongol.

They surrounded the Caliph, clamoring, arguing, quarreling, protesting. They drew him to one side while the Princess, obeying a sudden impulse, turned to Zemzem.

"Quick!" she whispered. "Before they notice! Ask the magic crystal to show us what Ahmed is doing."

Zemzem was sitting cross-legged in front of the couch, her back to the others so that they could not see. She spoke low words to the

crystal. She stared into it. Then she looked up excitedly.

"Heaven-Born!" came her sibilant murmur. "The Thief of Bagdad is on his way home!"

"Oh——" Zobeid forced back the exclamation.

"Yes. He flies. Flies through the air—mounted on a great white horse with shiny silver wings! Over valley he flies—and mountain—and stream—and forest—and desert! West he flies—home—to Bagdad—astride his great, winged horse!"

Zobeid laughed aloud with happiness. She called to the Caliph: "Father! Father, dear!"

"Yes, little daughter?" he asked, turning. "What is it?"

"Here am I," she laughed again, "like a donkey between three bundles of hay—and I do not know how to choose."

"Not a very flattering comparison to yourself," smiled the Caliph of Bagdad.

"Nor to my tree suitors, I am afraid," Zobeid went on, "for they represent the three bundles of hay. Without the Indian's crystal, they could not have known of my plight.

Without the Persian's carpet, they could not have come here so quickly. And without the Mongol's apple, they could not have cured me. Which of the three shall I choose?"

"If you choose one, the other two will object," replied her father, wearily. "They have already deafened me with their arguing and counter-arguing, their accusations and counter-accusations." He sighed. "Oh—I am so tired!"

"So am I," said the Princess. "Let us all go to sleep. Tomorrow will be time enough to decide."

"A good idea, daughter!"

Still grumbling, the three Princes assented. They left the apartment. But the Mongol, after bowing good-night to Zobeid, stopped for a moment near the window, as if wishing to look at the glorious view of Bagdad, golden and green beneath the setting sun. Three times he waved his handkerchief. He smiled thinly, cruelly, as almost immediately from a tower nearby an immense, triangular, red-and-gold flag was dipped—three times—in answer.

He knew that flag. The battle flag of his race. It was stiff with gold; stiffer with gore.

Whatever the morrow's decision, Zobeid would be his. Night would come soon. Bagdad would fall asleep. And then his Mongol warriors jumping to arms—the attack!

Again he bowed before the Princess, and left.

Alone with Zemzem, Zobeid stared into the magic crystal; stared into it to her heart's content.

Ahmed had flown down from the sky, not far from an enormous defile. He had dismounted from his winged horse.

“Why,” exclaimed the Princess, “look, Zemzem! He is talking to the horse! And—look, look! The horse seems to reply!”

“Impossible!” cried Zemzem. “I can imagine Ahmed talking to the horse. But—the horse replying to Ahmed . . . ? Why—it sounds like a fairy tale. It cannot be.”

But, Zemzem's doubt notwithstanding, it was.

For as the ancient Arab chronicle comments:

“When the impossible happens, it exists. A

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stone swims in the water, when eyes behold the fact of it. A monkey sings a Kashmiri love song, when ears hear the fact of it. Only idiots, old spinsters, cats, and learned professors contradict the testimony of their own five senses."

Indeed, having reached the western end of the Valley of the Seven Temptations, the horse had flown down to earth, and when Ahmed had dismounted had said to him, speaking in fair Arabic:

"I am, as you know, the Horse of Winged Imagination. At this side of the valley imagination ceases and, stretching to the West, to Bagdad, begins the life and world of hard facts. Back yonder you have learned several lessons, overcoming your pride, your envy, your jealousy, and gaining faith in Allah and the Prophet Mohammed—on Him the salute!—as well as resignation to the sendings of Fate. You also acquired two treasures, the silver box and the cloak of invisibility—which latter, by the way, as you will learn presently, shields your soul from the infamous lies and envy and hate of worthless people. I cannot

carry you any farther. For I am wanted back yonder, near the shore of the Midnight Sea, where another mortal is waiting for me to help him back across the abyss of black desires which, single-handed, even as you did, he conquered and crossed. *Salaam aleykum!*”

Without waiting for the Thief of Bagdad to reply, the Horse of Winged Imagination spread wide its splendid shining pinions, rose into the air in a graceful curve, turned East, and soon was nothing but a tiny speck of silver against the vaulting purple of the evening sky.

The Thief of Bagdad was alone.

He felt conscious of a certain sharp clutch and lift at the heart; a certain fear; a certain nervous apprehension as to what the future might bring. These seven months he had lived in a dim, motley, coiling world of wizardry where currents of primeval, cosmic earth life had tugged at his inmost self, changing portions of this self, changing his very soul—giving him a new soul. Now this new soul of Ahmed, the Thief of Bagdad, faced once more the

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old facts of life; this new soul felt like an alien amongst the old facts of life.

He looked to the West.

There leagues of beach wood poured down the slope of the hills in an enormous cataract of green and black-green foam, smothered farther down in an exuberance of blue and golden flowers. Beyond it stretched the desert; and across the desert cut a narrow caravan trail—the road to Bagdad.

Bagdad! Hundreds of miles away!

With the thought came a sharp and bitter pain. Why—he said to himself—it was near the end of the seventh moon. Tomorrow was the last day. Had he then conquered himself only to lose what he loved most on earth: Zo-beid? Yet, even with the pain gnawing at his heart and soul, he bowed his head in resignation to the decrees of Fate, and gave thanks to Allah:

“Say: He is the One God; God the Eternal! He beggeth not, nor is begotten. Nor is there one like unto Him! Verily I declare that He is the One God and that Mohammed is the Messenger of God!”

Then he squared his shoulders. Hundreds of miles to Bagdad, across desert and forest and mountain and desert again, and only one day to cover the distance. It was impossible. But he must try. So he stepped out, into the world of facts. He put his feet on the road of life; life that, as he descended the slope of the hill, pulsed everywhere about him, immense in power, moving swiftly, surging close to his heels and hands and heart, striding behind him and before, urging him on.

On he walked through the night, hungry, tired, his feet sore and bleeding, until very slowly the dawn of morning came with fantastic, purple spikes and the sun racing along the rim of the horizon in a sea of red and gold.

Then, at the edge of the desert, he saw a great gate of horn and ivory athwart the trail. The gate opened, and from it came the hermit whom, seven months earlier, he had met after he had passed through the defile of the Hill of Eternal Fire, the Hill of Pride.

Ahmed was about to walk on with a curt: "*Salaam aleykum!*"

But the hermit stopped him with a gesture of his thin, high-veined hands.

"Why—Ahmed!" he exclaimed, rather hurt. "I am glad to see you! Glad that you made the wondrous journey in safety! Come—and swap the time of day with an old friend!"

Ahmed shook his head.

"I am sorry," he replied. "But I am in a devilish hurry. I have only about twelve hours in which to walk nearly seven hundred miles. Besides, my feet burn like fire. Besides, I am hungry enough to eat a stewed mule. Besides . . ."

"Besides you are a fool!" interrupted the hermit.

"Thanks for the compliment!"

"No compliment intended. I am stating a fact. Thief of Bagdad—aren't you?"

"Well—used to be. What about it?"

"I cannot help wondering," laughed the hermit, "that, during your former light-fingered career, you got away without being caught time and again. Why—you have not even an ounce of mother's wit."

“Insults are no argument. Kindly explain!” demanded Ahmed stiffly.

“Here you have the magic silver box—I can see it sticking out of your waist shawl—and you have not even enough sense to use it.”

“Use it?”

“Yes. Open it. Don’t you know what is inside?”

“Happiness—also honor, I was told.”

“Rightly told! But, Ahmed, happiness is a helpmeet to those who deserve it—as you deserve it, having conquered your own self. And honor, too, helps in life’s struggles. Honor is really a very practical and constructive virtue. Fine ideals always are. That is exactly where cynical philosophers are wrong. Look!”—as Ahmed opened the little silver box—“do you see the tiny yellow seeds?”

“What are they?”

“They are seeds from the Flower of Unfulfilled but Righteous Desire. Throw a seed on the ground. Wish hard. And if the wish be just and right, a puff of smoke will rise from the earth where the seed struck it, and at once you will have your wish fulfilled. Why”—as

Ahmed hesitated—"don't you believe me? Try it! Wish! Wish hard!"

"Very well," replied Ahmed; and, raising his hands to heaven, he exclaimed: "I want a horse—a horse swift as the wind, to cover the distance between here and Bagdad before the day is over. And I also want a square meal. For I am terribly hungry!"

He took one of the little seeds, dropped it, and at once a puff of smoke rose from the ground, and there stood a tall, splendid, broad-backed Marwari stallion, black with a white star on the forehead, white stockings, dainty but strong hocks, and gorgeously saddled and bridled.

"By Allah!" cried Ahmed. "The silver box works!"

He dropped another seed; came another puff of smoke; and a table came out of the nowhere, covered with snowy linen, glass, silver, fruit, drink, and platters of steaming food.

"Come, wise hermit!" laughed Ahmed. "Be my guest! Here is food enough for two!"

They ate. Then the hermit blessed Ahmed, who mounted the stallion and was off.

The horse paced away faster than the wind—faster and faster—a mile at a jump—a mile at a leap—a mile at each stretch of its splendid, steely body.

Ahmed rode as he had never ridden before. He rode with a song in his heart. For here was his Fate blazing ahead of him like a sacred Grail; and, through the velvety glow of the sun, through the purple shadows of the low, volcanic hills which flanked the road and which danced like hobgoblins among the dwarf aloes, through the *click-clanketty-click* of the stallion's dancing feet, there came to him the clarion call to life's happiness and life's work and life's fulfilment.

The farther West he rode, the clearer became the singing joy in his heart.

Click-clanketty-click spoke the horse's dancing feet. A gecko slipped away through the brush. A low-flapping bird brushed his face. The sun bored down with a brutish, flaming gesture.

There were few signs of life. Once in a while a carrion-hawk poised high in the parched, blue sky above him. Twice he passed Tartar camel

riders, short, lean, brown, bow-legged men, whose jaws and brows were bound mummy fashion against the stinging sand of the desert, and who touched their rosary beads with superstitious awe as the wild horseman swept past them, faster than the North wind.

On he rode, bending over the horse's neck, lifting it with every stride, keeping its nose straight to the road—a mile at a leap—a mile at a jump—a mile at each stretch of its splendid, steely body; until, having ridden the night through, he saw in the distance, in the greenish gloom of young day, a dark mass looming up: the oasis of Terek el-Bey—and Bagdad not far away.

The dark mass was becoming more distinct with every second. It split into tents and palm trees; and Ahmed dismounted to say his morning prayers:

“Allah! I praise Thee and I thank Thee! For Thou art the Lord God! Thou art . . .”

“*Yoo-yoo-yoo! Yoo-yoo-yoo!*”—a great sobbing and wailing drowned his prayers with loud, overlapping tone waves.

He looked up.

There, straggling down the road, coming from the direction of Bagdad, he saw a huge mob of men and women and children; hurrying, hurrying; loaded with household goods, having picked up what first had come to hand, like people when their home is burning above their heads—useless, absurd things; beating their breasts; crying, yelling, weeping—and hurrying, ever hurrying.

Ahmed stopped an old man.

“What has happened?” he demanded.

“The Mongols have taken Bagdad,” came the shattering reply. “They have captured the Caliph and the Princess Zobeid. They are murdering the people. They are polluting the wells. They are stabling their horses in the temples of Allah. They are crucifying the priests. They are looting and burning the ancient town!”

“*Yoo-yoo-yoo! Yoo-yoo-yoo!*”—rose again the sobbing and wailing, while Ahmed bowed toward Mecca.

“Forgive me, O Lord God,” he said, “that this morning I cannot finish my prayer. But

my heart and soul and fist are needed at Bagdad!"

And he mounted his stallion and rode away.



CHAPTER X



CHAPTER X

ON THE evening before, after Wong K'ai had replied to the message of the Mongol Prince's fluttering handkerchief by dipping the crimson, triangular flag three times, he had waited until dark.

Bagdad was asleep. Night lay over the slumbering town with a trailing cloak of purple shadows. In the black depths of the sky hung tiny points of light that glistened with the cold gleam of diamonds. The bazars were shuttered until the morning. So were the houses and palaces, with no sign of life except, here and there, a light springing warm and friendly through chink or curtained window. The mosques were empty. Nobody was abroad except, occasionally, a watchman making the rounds with swinging lantern and steel-shod pike; a prowling leprous beggar nosing for scraps in a heap of refuse; a lover returning from a scented, romantic meeting. Another

half hour—and the watchmen fell asleep in dark posterns and doorways, squatting comfortably, their pikes across their drawn-up knees; the beggars sought the asylum of their hovels to whine their complaints to other beggars; the lovers returned home to dream.

Not a sound now except a dim stir of leaves blown about by some vagabond wisp of wind.

Black, silent, the night looked down.

Then, at the shock of midnight, according to the prearranged signal, Wong K'ai mounted the tower of the Caravanserai of the Tartar Traders. There, secretly, an enormous beacon had been prepared these many weeks. He lit it. A few seconds later, the flame of it stabbed through the velvety gloom with an intense, strident, threatening, golden wedge. Another second—and from the minaret of the Mosque of Suleyman the Magnificent a gleaming circle of torches replied to the beacon, sending showers of sparks. At once, in the four quarters of the city, other torches took up the message, puncturing the night. The sky grew scarlet and crimson, like a netted weave of molten, half-liquid metal, with a trail of emerald-

green and peacock-green cutting through it. Reds softened to violets. The torches moved through the streets, with the tramp-tramp-tramp of marching feet. The fires were like the blood-gleam in an immense, black opal.

Came a bull-like roar of long-stemmed Mongol war trumpets; a beating of drums; a shrilling and wailing of fifes.

Here and there a watchman awoke, startled, frightened, picking up his steel-shod pike. What was it? A conflagration? Perhaps a tribal row of desert Bedawins drunk with hasheesh in some caravanserai? Revolt? Mutiny?

"Who goes there?"—the watchmen's challenging questions as shadows came round the street corners with a crackle of naked steel.

They had no time to find the answer. Out of the dark in back of them—where these many hours Mongol spies had been watching them—leaped other shadows. The flash of curved Mongol daggers. Pikes clattered harmlessly to the ground. A sob and gurgle of death. Blood staining bright tunics, staining darkly the earth.

The next moment it seemed as if all Bagdad's alleys and bazars and caravanserais were disgorging the flat-featured, yellow-skinned warriors of the North and the East, iron-capped, chain-armored, armed with lances and swords and battle-axes. A forest of oval-bladed, tall spears moved rapidly across the Square of the One-Eyed Jew. Other Mongols rushed out of houses and palaces where they had hired themselves out as servants.

A Babel of war cries rose, in Tartar and Mongol and harsh, guttural Manchu.

In companies of a hundred each, four abreast, they marched through Bagdad, with a steady, forward motion. Scarred, wind-beaten—stained with the blood of many battles, the mud of many bivouacs, but in their tramp the ringing rhythm of success, pennants and standards fluttering vivid brightness of device and colors above the dazzling glitter of tall spears.

Then, as always, with the scent and hope of loot, the Mongol ranks broke here and there as fists crashed against doors, as weapons pried open locks, as men rushed across thresholds to rob and kill.

Wong K'ai exchanged a quick word with the war captains.

"An hour's looting! Then the attack against the palace!" He smiled with cruel amusement. "Wild dogs must be fed before they can be trained!"

They were excited shouts and queries as windows were thrown open. Householders leaned out. Heads were quickly withdrawn as battle-axes came whistling and whirling through the air.

"Allah! What was it? A band of robbers from the desert, setting at defiance the Caliph's law? Bedawin raiders?"

"Help! Help! Soldiers! Police! This is the Caliph's town! Must we have our honest sleep disturbed by pulling, quarreling desert rats?"

Then, as the torches flared higher, bathing the streets in a sea of light, as steel-clad warriors invaded the houses:

"Oh—by the Prophet!—the Mongols! The Mongols!—God protect us!"

A shudder ran over Bagdad. The Mongols! The flat-nosed, yellow-skinned riders of the

North! The terror of all Asia and half Europe! The Scourge of God! The dread warriors with the awe of whose name German and Russian mothers frightened their naughty children!

“Dear Lord God”—came a Moslem priest’s stammered prayer—“against the darkness of the night when it overtaketh me and against the Mongol scourge, I betake me for refuge to Allah, the Lord of Daybreak . . .”

He had no time to finish the prayer. A squat, bow-legged Mongol captain rushed into the Mosque. His crooked sabre flashed away from the tassled cord that held it. The point of it gleamed like a cresset of evil passions. It descended. It cut across the priest’s neck with a dull, sickning *whish-whish-whish*. The priest fell backward with a soft, gurgling cry—his blood trickling slowly, staining God’s altar with splotches of rich crimson.

Arab soldiers tumbled out of their barracks, strapping on their weapons as they ran. They went down before the Mongol lances as ripe wheat before a reaper’s blade. The scourge passed on. Gates shook. Walls crumbled.

The streets ran red with blood. Flames licked over roofs with yellow tongues.

They tore through the peaceful town with the swish of the sword, the scream and bray of war trumpets, the rasp of bamboo lance butts, the thud of broad blades; here and there like a scarlet typhoon of destruction; blazing up and down the streets and alleys with the leap of their lean knives; already, from desert and forest and mountain, the carrion-hawks wheeling and dipping to the feast and paralleling the Mongols' progress on eager wings; looting, burning, killing.

"An easy thing to write about," comments the ancient Arabic chronicle—"a horrible thing to picture. For the sabre was the only god whom these accursed, dog-faced Mongols worshipped. May their souls burn in the lowest depths of perdition for a thousand eternities to come!"

Looting. Burning. Killing.

Treasure smashed and torn and trampled on, because found useless or too heavy to carry away. Priceless rugs slashed. Priceless porcelain shattered to pieces. Priceless lives—of

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children and poets and philosophers—sacrificed to the god of the sabre. Broken doors. Gutted shops. Shivered walls. Huddled in frightened heaps, crawled into the darkness of cellars and cisterns, where the wounded, a remnant of the living, crazed with anguish and terror. Out in the open streets and alleys, was stench of festering flesh, loathsomeness, a crimson, sickening mush of what once had been useful, contented human life.

Ruins. Temples of God desecrated. Shaggy Tartar ponies stabled in the holiest of holies. An Empire lost in a night.

Death. Torture. Decay. Sacrilege. The Mongol's historic mission before Islam tamed and civilized him. And, up in his room in the Caliph's palace, the Mongol Prince looking out upon the doomed city of Bagdad and uttering the ancient boast of his dynasty:

"I am the enemy of god—of pity—and of mercy!" ,

In the meantime, out in the streets, the captains were giving orders to stop the sack:

"To the palace! To the attack! Tomorrow you can continue your looting!"

They fell once more into military formation. Four abreast, they rolled through the streets of Bagdad, relentless, resistless, with the thunder of the drums, the bull-like roar of the long-stemmed trumpets, the sardonic shrilling of the fifes, the crackle of weapons, the yelling of savage, throaty war cries—with a sweeping, indomitable energy that raised the crunching, cruel soul of the Mongol scorge into something nearly magnificent.

On—the forest of lances! On—the dazzling glitter of tall spears! On—the fluttering of the battle flags! On—with the flames that licked over the Bagdad bazars peaking higher and higher, changing night into ruddy day, glinting on steel and iron with running white highlights, shimmering with gold and silver on keen-edged swords and armor.

They swarmed like locusts. They killed whatever was in their path. Thus Germany had known them, paying for defeat with the flower of its knighted chivalry on East Prussia's and Silesia's battlefields. Thus Russia and Poland had feared them, trampled into bloody mire beneath the feet of their small, shaggy,

ponies. Thus China and India and Hungary had wilted beneath their blight. Thus, time and again, they had drawn a crimson furrow across half the world. Thus, this day, Bagdad—and with Bagdad all Araby, all Islam—seemed doomed to fall under their pitiless yoke.

They marched down the broad avenue that led to the palace of the Caliph; marched clumsily—being men born and bred on horseback—but steadily. The high call of an ivory horn stabbed out; it was repeated from troop to troop; and at once they split into three columns. One column swung West to cut off the defenders should they try for retreat or sally. The second column flanked the great garden which surrounded the palace, made a living platform and staircase with the help of their steel-bossed, buffalo-hide arm shields, clambered up on the wall, jumped down the farther side. The third column, composed of picked Manchu shock troops, giants in size and strength, made direct for the steel front gate. It gave under their massed impetus as if it were brittle glass—and fear swept over the palace servants and slaves and eunuchs who, at the news of the Mongol

attack, had been formed there to give battle.

They ran away, throwing down their weapons, with frenzied cries, pressing, pressing—fighting, killing each other in their mad haste to escape. A sea of black and brown and white—hands striking out crazily, futilely—voices bellowing puny defiance—other voices imploring for mercy—tearing screams as the Mongol spears went home—bodies falling, trampled, crushed.

The caliph's bodyguard of noble Arabs rallied. They fought bravely. But the Mongol horde waved them aside as with a single, contemptuous gesture—killed them with that same gesture. On the battlements a few watchmen jumped into the fray. They were tumbled off the walls to be caught and impaled by the forest of lances below.

The Mongols poured into the palace.

Too late the Caliph had understood the Mongol Prince's treachery. At first, like the city watchmen, like the Bagdad citizens roused from sleep, he had imagined that it was only a passing riot of Bedawin desertmen. Too late, now that he knew, accompanied by a handful of

soldiers and by the Princes of India and Persia—poor little man, his spirit was willing though his flesh was decidedly over-weight—he rushed toward the Mongol Prince's room to make him pay with his life.

Too late!

On the stairway they met the vanguard of the invaders; were pulled down; heard the Mongol Prince's ironic command to his warriors as he stepped from his room:

“Do not harm them. For as to the Caliph, I shudder at the sacrilegious thought of killing my future father-in-law. And as to the descendant of Hindustan's impotent gods and the descendant of Persia's grease pots—why”—he laughed—“before I kill them I shall have them harnessed like horses to my chariot of victory, tomorrow, when I shall drive in triumph through the streets of Bagdad!”

To the Persian's greater glory be it said that, in spite of his fear, he broke into a flood of abuse, calling the other every bad name he could think of:

“Traitor! Pig! Dog-faced Mongol bar-

barian! Seller of hog's tripe! Descendant of monkeys!"

More of the sort. Nor did the Mongol interrupt him. He waited until lack of breath caused the Persian to stop. Then he smiled.

"You are braver than I imagined, O great sausage!" he replied. "Very well. Your tortures tomorrow shall be lengthy, novel, and exquisite—to let me see how brave you really are!"

Then, at his order, they dragged the captives away, while he returned to his room, closing the door.

From the outside, strident cries and yells drifted in as the Mongol swords leaped to their grim work.

He smiled. Then he frowned. He wished to be alone, quite alone with his pride and his coiling thoughts. So he closed the windows and the heavy iron shutters. The noises from the outside ceased. Only a dim memory of sounds was left in gliding, vibrant tone waves—very soft, very far away, not at all like the echo of battle and death.

There was now in the room a cloak of enor-

mous, breath-clogging stillness. Crushing, unhuman stillness.

For a few seconds he stood quite motionless, thoughts flashing and zigzagging through his brain, deeply furrowing his yellow, stark devil's-mask of a face.

Then he walked to a taboret on which was a narrow, square package wrapped in silk of imperial yellow, embroidered with the five-clawed dragon. He took off the wrapping; took out a dozen tiny, very thin tablets of emerald-green, transparent jade inlaid in gold with a succession of Mandarin hieroglyphics. These tablets were the ancestral tablets of his clan, reaching back into the dim mists of antiquity when his forefathers were still wild shepherd chiefs near the shores of Lake Baikal, in Central Asia. Generation for generation, century for century, victory for victory, also occasional defeats when the Mongols were driven back into the steppes, thence to issue again, a generation later, with renewed vigor and savagery—generation for generation, the history of his clan was gold-engraved there on the smooth jade tablets.

He bowed before the tablets with slow, proper ceremony. He filled a bronze bowl with black incense powder, lit it, and watched the scented smoke curl up in opalescent spirals. From the ceiling lamp a yellow ray of light stabbed down, cutting across his face as clean as with a knife, emphasizing the prominent cheek bones, the oblique, heavy-lidded eyes, the thin lips, heightening the expression of stony relentlessness on his features, yet, too, strangely, incongruously, lending to them something akin to spiritual ecstasy. He stared at the coiling incense clouds. Through the whirling, perfumed smoke he saw the green glitter of his ancestral tablets; saw there his own aim and the aim of his race—like a blood-red, challenging scrawl across the history of all the world.

Again he bowed, with hands clasped across his chest. Then he spoke. It was a prayer to his race, his tribe, his clan, his dynasty, himself.

A prayer. Too, a grim prophecy:

“As long as water runs and the wind blows, as long as fire burns and the seas toss, so long

shall the Mongol race endure. It runs its way like a shuttle through all the broad lands of the earth, waving an eternal, unbreakable fabric. Time and again, in the past, the Mongol power has gone down before the gathered strength of other races, snatching at and taking the luring jewel of dominion. Time and again we returned to the attack; we shivered the fetters; we enslaved the enslavers. Time and again, in the future, the Mongol power shall go down before the gathered strength of other races, snatching at and taking the luring jewel of power. Time and again we shall return to the attack; we shall shiver the fetters; we shall enslave the enslavers." His voice rose shrilly, triumphantly. "Yellow, toothy wolves we, of our mothers' bearing! Never shall we eat dirt to stay our craving! Ours is the greatest ambition, the greatest call, the greatest mission on earth. We cleanse with the swish of the sword when it is red. And the end is not yet; will not be for many centuries; never will be. For ours is the only pure race on earth. Our race is undying, eternal. The Emperors of Germany and of Russia, the Kings of Poland and Hun-

gary, the Dukes of Lithuania and the Volga Tribes, the Chiefs and Khans and Princes of half the world have gone down before the shining Mongol sword. Thus, in the future, Kings and Nations and Republics shall kowtow before our curved scimitars and kiss the shadows of our horses' feet. Time and again! Time and again! For ours is the vigor and the energy and the subtle brain and the harsh, ruthless will. Ours is forever the mighty, ever resurgent resurrection of race. All that is welded together by the rest of mankind we shall again and again tear asunder. All that has been built by the rest of mankind we shall again and again overthrow. All the weak deities invented and worshipped by the rest of mankind we shall again and again send down to oblivion and ridicule. For we are the Scourge of God!"

He bowed once more before the jade tablets; then turned as the door opened to admit Wong K'ai.

"Tomorrow morning," he said, "I shall elevate the Princess Zobeid to the dragon throne. She is of foreign race. I know. But the Mongol race is stronger. My great-grandfather

married a German Princess captured in war, but the son of this union, my grandfather, was pure Mongol. My grandfather married an Indian Princess stolen by Tartar raiders, but my father was pure Mongol. My father married a Persian Princess, sent to him as a tribute by the Shah-in-Shah, but I am pure Mongol. I shall marry an Arab Princess. But my sons shall be pure Mongol."

He paused; went on:

"Tell Zobeid to prepare for the wedding. Let it be a wedding after the Mongol manner. Bestow on every one of my soldiers a horse, a slave, and three gold pieces. Bestow on every one of my war captains nine times nine white stallions, nine times nine precious pearls, nine times nine crimson robes of honor, nine times nine pieces of gold, nine times nine rolls of silk, and nine times nine female slaves. Have all the astrologers, sorcerers, soothsayers, and witch-doctors fed at my expense. Let there be a tinkling of bells and burning of incense and chanting of songs throughout Bagdad. See that all the Moslem priests be crucified at the altars of their impotent Allah. Have all the

Christian and Jewish merchants' teeth pulled one by one, so that their cries may make sweet music. Give to the Princess Zobeid as my wedding present the Kingdom of Tartary, the Chieftainship of Outer Mongolia, the Viceroyalty of Manchuria, the Island of Wak, and the revenues from nineteen thousand villages and cities in Russia and Siberia. Tell her that I shall confer upon her the charming and elegant title of the Model of Ten Thousand Female Generations to Come!"

"Listen is obey, O Great Dragon!" murmured Wong K'ai and withdrew, while the Prince of the Mongols walked over to the window and opened it.

He looked out.

Gradually the loom of the night lifted; the fires set here and there by the looting Mongol warriors had died out; and the smoke veil which had covered the town twisted up in baroque spirals and tore into gauzelike arabesques.

He gave a sensuous, throaty exclamation of triumph.

For down there at his feet Bagdad became

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more and more distinct every minute. There stretched hundreds of flat, dazzling white rooftops, richly adorned towers, fairy-like turrets, and bell-shaped Arab domes. Under the rays of the young sun the sloping roof of a Mosque in the middle of the city burned like the plumage of a gigantic peacock with every mysterious blend of blue and green and purple and heliotrope. The whole was buried in flaunting gardens gay with many-colored trees and shrubs and bushes, with crotons and mangoes, with roses and mellingtonias, with poinsettias and begonia creepers.

Bagdad! Bagdad was his! His the dominion over Araby and—soon, soon—over all Islam! His the subjection of these stiff-necked Arabs, these stiff-necked Semites! His the worship of their grief-stricken sobbing and wailing that beat up from city and palace in immense tone waves. . . .

Yet in the palace there was one that night who neither wailed nor sobbed nor complained. It was Zobeid, although there were Mongol

warriors in her very bedroom, watching her for fear that she might commit suicide.

But there was no such thought in her brain. Huddled close against Zemzem, she whispered to her the reason for her serene fortitude of soul.

"Ahmed is coming!" she said. "Aye! He is coming! I saw it in the magic crystal!"

"But he is alone, Heaven-Born! What can one man do against the Mongol horde?"

"Have you ever been in love, Zemzem?" smiled Zobeid.

"Oh, yes. Three or four times."

"I do not believe you."

"Why not, Heaven-Born?"

"Because, if you had really been in love, you would know that the loved one can do anything—anything and everything. Good night, Zemzem!"

And she slept quietly, fearlessly, with neither dream nor nightmare, while down the road from Terek el-Bey the Thief of Bagdad spurred his great black stallion through the night, through the green and yellow of young

morning, at last arriving at Bagdad and demanding entrance with a loud voice.

A yellow-skinned, flat-nosed, iron-capped warrior appeared on the wall and looked down.

"Go away!" he said in his loutish Mongol speech. "The gates of Bagdad are closed until after the wedding."

"Whose wedding?"

"The wedding of Cham Sheng, the Great Dragon, and Zobeid, daughter of the Caliph."

The man withdrew; returned as Ahmed leaned from his horse, rattling at the gate, beating against it with the hilt of his sword, shouting noisily and insolently:

"Let me in, let me in, dog-snouted Mongol pig! Hey, there, let me in, O most unbeautiful yellow pimple bereft of all the virtues!"

The other raised his battle-axe threateningly.

"I gave you fair words," he said. "Now I give you fair warning. If you do not go away, immediately, quietly, like a decent lad, by the tribal gods of my clan, I shall . . ."

"Pah!" sneered Ahmed. "Powerless gods—the gods of your clan! Swinish gods for a

swinish race! Pot-bellied, yellow-skinned, slit-eyed, ridiculous, indecent Mongol gods! Wait! Hold your hand a second"—as the battle-axe was about to come down whistling through the air—"and I will show you what mine own God can do! Allah, the One, the All-Powerful! Look, Mongol pig! Behold the blessed miracle!"

And, the thought popping into his brain, his fingers obeying the thought, he dipped them deeply into the magic silver box that was filled to the brim with the tiny seeds—the wishing seeds—the seeds from the Tree of Righteous but Unfulfilled Desires.

He sprinkled the seeds thickly on the ground.

He spoke hurriedly, fervently:

"O Allah! I want soldiers! Mounted, armed soldiers! Brave Moslem soldiers! Fearless soldiers, Arabs and Turks and Moors and Egyptians—soldiers from all the lands of Islam—to protect Bagdad from Mongol desecration—to save the ancient city—to save Zo-beid! Soldiers I want—numerous as the waves of the sea, the sand grains of the desert!"

And suddenly the Mongol captain's sneer

changed into a stare of incredulity, a grimace of surprise, fear, horror, as, springing from the ground like great flowers, there rose an immense army of mounted Moslem fighting-men, men of a dozen races, brandishing their weapons.



CHAPTER XI



CHAPTER XI

As THE wind blew the tiny yellow seeds about, wherever they struck the ground other Moslem warriors popped out of the nowhere with a little puff of smoke as the only warning that they were coming. They were mostly on horseback. But some were on foot, and there was a splendid troop of desertmen riding upon dromedaries, nodding in their lofty, peaked, crimson saddles to the deep gait of their animals, with a cold glisten of iron and black song of war.

“Allah akbar!” they cried. *“Allah akbar! Din! Din! Fateh Mohammed!”*

They came like the whirlwind; hacking at the gate with their battle-axes and splintering it; horses and camels prancing and rearing, weapons glittering in the sun, burnooses of all colors floating in the breeze.

“On!” they cried. *“Ride on for the Faith!”*

Allah is most great! Kill—kill—in the name of the Prophet!”

Crusaders, they. Warriors for Islam. Men of great courage. Noble souls.

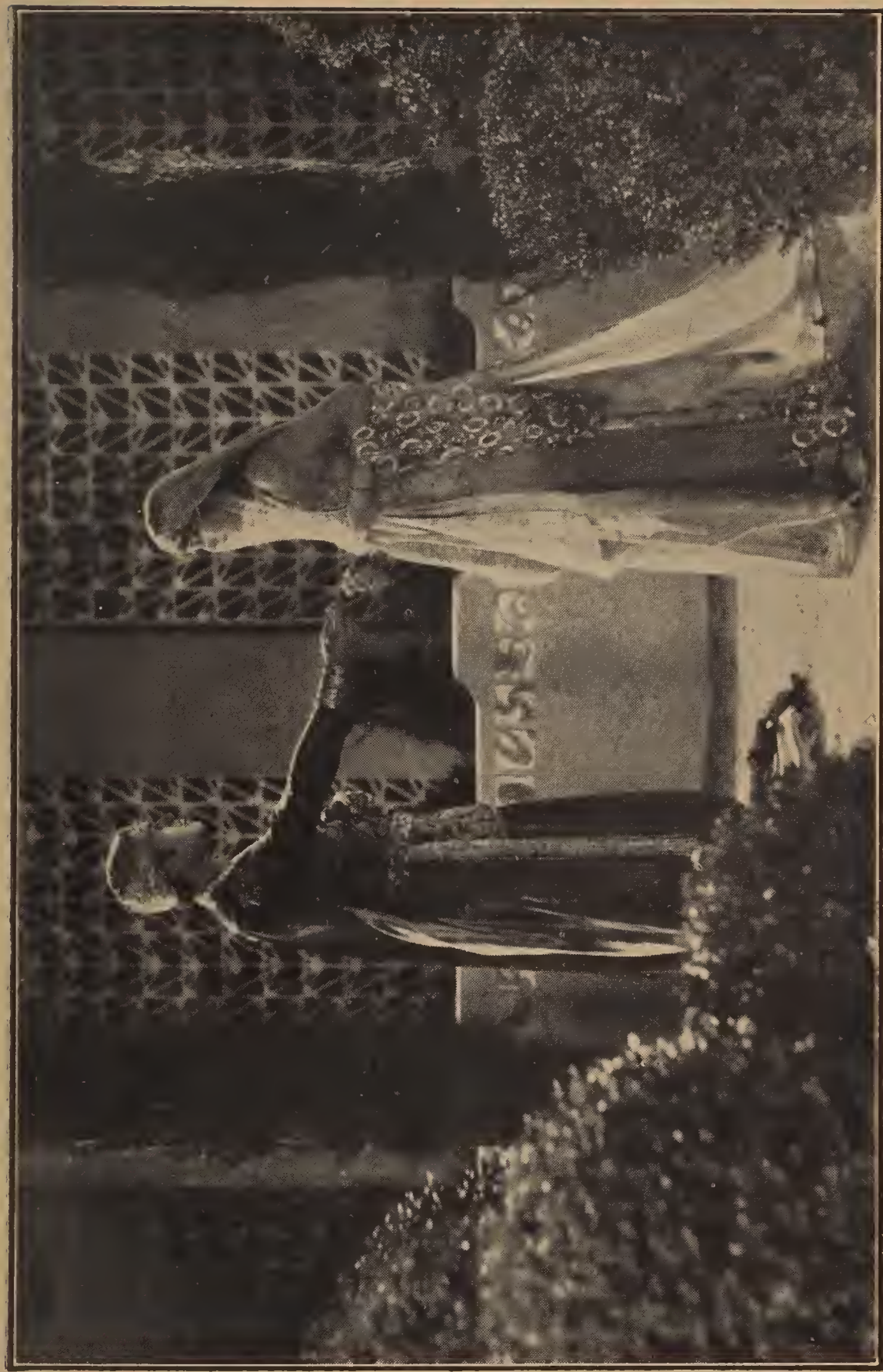
Noble souls?

Here is a disputable point.

For the ancient Arab chronicle from which we derive the tale of the Thief of Bagdad interrupts the narrative here to make the following rather interesting comment:

“To this day the descendants of these warriors live in Bagdad, Damascus, and throughout Arabistan. Many of them use the family names of Ibn Kubbut and Ibn Zura, which means “Son of the Seed,” in proof of their extraordinary paternal ancestry. Those who entered Bagdad with Ahmed filled the places of the men killed by the Mongol horde. But while they made good soldiers and later on good husbands and fathers, the Moslem priests and theologians have never been quite sure if they or their descendants can lay claim to having a soul.

“For consider how Allah, so as to prepare



"I am not a Prince."

("The Thief of Bagdad.")

for the future mission of Mohammed, created Adam!

“Adam was created out of God’s will. Some traditions say that the head of Adam when first shaped reached the sky, and they also say that Adam was so named because his color was red, like wheat; for wheat is called ‘*adameh*’ in the classic Arabic, the which is the language of the One God. The creation of Adam occurred on Friday, the tenth of the month Mohurrum, at the eleventh hour, at the rising of the first degree of Aries, Saturn being in the same constellation, and Mars in Capricorn. God then asked the Angels to kneel before Adam, and all obeyed except Iblis, who thus became Shaitan, the Devil, the Fallen Angel. Then God created Eve. But Iblis, seeing that for one crime he had forfeited all the merit of his former obedience, determined to do Adam any injury in his power. Now Adam was in Paradise, where Iblis could not enter. At length, however, as is detailed in history and tradition, by art and the assistance of a peacock stationed on the walls of Paradise as a guardian and a serpent who was the sentinel

at the northern gate, Iblis entered. It is furthermore related how Iblis tempted Adam and Eve—as all the world knows—and how Adam, driven out of the garden of Eden, exclaimed: ‘O Allah! Why didst Thou endow me with a soul? For had I been without a soul, Thou couldst have neither blamed nor punished me for giving way to temptation!’ And then Adam wept—this happened on a mountain in Hindustan, where Adam and Eve, after the Fall, were driven from Paradise, on Friday, the fifth of the month Nisan—and from the tears he shed sprang up pepper, cardamums, and cinnamon, while from the grief in his soul sprang the clouds, the weeds, the desert jackals, and the scavenger crows.

“Not on all these points do the wise theologians agree. But there is no argument about God having given a soul to Adam, nor that, for the sake of the salvation of his soul, He later on sent Mohammed amongst the mortals as His Messenger.

“But the warriors who rode with Ahmed into Bagdad were not the descendants of Adam, but the descendants of seeds. Thus riseth the

question—had they souls, or were they merely realized segments, materialized fractions of Ahmed's imagination? Here is the moot point in the controversy; and we repeat that to this day many respectable Moslem theologians refuse to admit that the descendants of these seeds, the members of the families of Ibn Kubbut and Ibn Zura, are endowed with Allah's excellent and blessed spirit. . . ."

So the ancient Arabic chronicle goes on for a number of pages. Not that the Mongol captain cared about their souls either way, as, open-mouthed, frightened, he watched the terrible miracle of their appearance from the battlements.

He jumped down; ran away as fast as he could, spreading the alarm throughout Bagdad, shouting loudly:

"Fly for your lives, O Mongols! A great magician has come! He summons armies, invincible fightingmen, from the very bowels of the earth!"

"Fly for your lives! Fly for your lives!" came echoing shouts as the Moslem warriors, Ahmed at their head, rode through the gates.

They darted on like winged phantoms; old and young; Arabs and Turks, Egyptians and Moors and Turkomans; men of colossal proportions, strange and terrible figures erect in their square silver stirrups, with heads thrown back, hair streaming loose in the wind, sabres waved aloft, lances at the carry; and small, beardless youngsters, perched like monkeys on their high saddles, but using their weapons with the same swish and sweep and surge as their elders. Over their shining silver armor their burnouses, red and purple and green and yellow and blue, mingled into a gorgeous rainbow as the cavalcade crossed the Square of the One-Eyed Jew; then dissolved to form fresh, audacious color combinations as the riders split into smaller groups, galloping down side streets and alleys in the pursuit of the flying, panic-stricken Mongols, cutting down stragglers, rounding up whole companies of the yellow-skinned, iron-capped horde, putting them to the sword for the Faith.

“Kill! Kill—in the name of the Prophet!”

The savage war cry was everywhere. Enormously peaking, bloating, spreading, it rever-

berated from streets to Mosques, from Mosques to houses, from houses to cellars and cisterns where the citizens of Bagdad were hiding in fear and trembling before the Scourge of God. They heard; wondered; came cautiously out of their hiding-places; looked. Then, beholding the triumphant advance of the liberators, they picked up weapons at random and rushed out.

Here and there they killed a lonely Mongol. Ten minutes later they were convinced, every last one of them, that it was their own bravery which was bringing victory, and they flatly discounted the fact that, without Ahmed's splendid miracle, they would have continued to submit to the Mongol yoke as sheepishly as the night before.

The chronicle goes on to say how the citizens of Bagdad scurried in the wake of the liberators, killing wounded Mongols, nor risking their precious lives overmuch.

Loudly they shouted:

"Kill! Kill the Mongols! Reduce them to ashes! Cut them in two! Hash them to pulp! Drive them away! Drink their blood! De-

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stroy them root and branch! Annihilate them utterly!”

And it is interesting to observe that those who gave the loudest and most blood-curdling shouts were the men who, on the night before, when the Mongols had attacked, had left their very women and children to the invaders' mercy in their haste to bore like rats into subterranean hiding-places.

Ahmed rode at the head of his army.

“*Allah akbar!*” he cried. “God is great!”

And as he galloped up the broad avenue that led to the palace of the Caliph, again and again he dipped his hand into the silver box, sprinkling the little yellow seeds on the ground; again and again warriors rose, until their numbers were like the stars in the Milky Way, and there was no hope for the Mongols, though here and there they rallied and gave battle with all their ferocious Mongol courage.

A few escaped the carnage. Quickly they ran to the palace and brought the news. It spread like powder under spark.

Down in the dungeon where the Caliph of

the Faithful and the Princes of Persia and Hindustan were kept prisoners, was rejoicing.

"I always knew," said the Prince of India, "that my divine ancestors would not let me perish! When I return to Hindustan I shall sacrifice seventeen thousand youths of excellent family to Doorga, the Great Mother!"

"And I," said the Persian, "as soon as I leave this cell, shall dine on a roasted peacock, stuffed with white grapes, and three bottles of foreign wine. Incidentally"—turning to the Caliph—"now that the Mongol is out of the way, or at least about to be out of the way, I wish to reaffirm my claims to your daughter's hand . . ."

"Not at all!" interrupted the Prince of India. "Not at all! It is I who . . ."

"Do shut up, both of you!" exclaimed the Caliph, for once in his life forgetting what he owed to his kingly breeding. "I would not have either one of you as son-in-law. My daughter shall marry the man who has reconquered Bagdad, and I care not if he be Moslem or Jew, Christian or Buddhist, nor if he be white or green, thief or emperor!"

Thus spoke the voices of Asia's mighty po-

tentates down in the cellar, while up in the tower room of the palace, not far from Zobeid's apartment, Wong K'ai asked his master to escape while there still was a chance. But the Mongol Prince shook his head stubbornly. He pointed at his ancestral tablets.

"My race is eternal, invincible!" he pronounced with somber, grim dignity. "I flee from neither gods nor devils."

"But even you, O Great Dragon," implored Wong K'ai, "cannot fight against miracles! Look!"—pointing from the window—"ever more warriors arise from the ground! Come! There is still time to . . ."

"No!"

"Please, please, O Great Dragon!"

And when at last the Prince decided to take Wong K'ai's advice, it was too late. Already the Moslems had overrun the palace grounds, cleaving their way through the serried ranks of the Manchu shock troops who resisted bravely. But there was no hope for the latter. Most of the Mongol and Tartar guards stationed in the palace—only a few, really the Prince's body servants, remained behind—reinforced

the Manchus. But foot by foot, second by second, the forest of spears fell before the forest of Moslem swords, Ahmed always in the van, spurring his horse into the thick of the fight, his sabre whirling like a flail.

The Mongol Prince watched from the window. He shrugged his shoulders. He turned to his ancestral tablets. He kowtowed deeply.

"Accept, O spirits of my ancestors," he said solemnly, "mine own spirit. Today I leap the Dragon Gate. I accept defeat. Yet"—and his voice rose proudly—"I know that others of my race will come after me, that again and again the world will quail and fall before the Mongol scourge!"

Calmly, unhurriedly, he bared his neck and knelt on the ground.

"Wong K'ai," he went on, "it is now your elegant and respectable duty to cut off my head!"

"No, no, O Great Dragon!"

"I command it!"

Wong K'ai sighed.

"Listen is obey!" he murmured.

Already he had unsheathed his curved sword

and was about to bring it down with a full swing, when the door opened and, followed by half a dozen guards, Fount-in-the-Forest rushed in, shouting excitedly:

“Oh—listen—listen! There is a way! You can escape! The magic flying carpet!”

“By the Buddha!” exclaimed Cham Sheng. “You are right!” He rose. He turned to the guards. “Bring me the magic rug!” And to Wong K’ai: “I shall take Zobeid with me. Together she and I will fly away to the far North, to Mongolia, my own country, where not even these miraculous warriors will dare follow!”

What was ultimately destined to save Zobeid was the fact that this was a palace of the Orient, a Moslem house where there is no privacy for laughter nor for grief, not even for despair, where there is a peep-hole in every wall and door and curtain and ceiling, where in every room there are invisible, watching eyes and invisible, listening ears. So, had not the steely clank of the battle outside drowned all other sounds, the Prince might have heard a rustle of silken garments and the noise of bare

feet pattering away as Zemzem, who had overheard the plot from an adjoining alcove, ran to her mistress and told her.

The latter was alone in her apartment. For a few seconds earlier, looking from the window and seeing their comrades go down before the Moslem scimitars, the soldiers detailed to watch her had joined their countrymen in their last stand.

“Come!” cried Zemzem. “Down the staircase and through the back door into the garden—I know the way—follow me, Heaven-Born!”

She was out of the room and down the stairs. Zobeid was a few feet behind her. Zemzem had already reached the corner of the lower staircase when from the opposite direction came Cham Sheng with Wong K'ai and the Mongols who carried the magic carpet. They stepped directly between Zobeid and Zemzem. The latter was on the point of retracing her steps, of helping her mistress with whatever strength she had—and there was more than one young Arab soldier and servant about the palace who, romantically inclined, could tell tales about Zemzem's scratching, clawing fin-

ger-nails—when Zobeid motioned to her to continue on her way to the garden.

Zemzem understood the silent message. A battle-axe whizzed past her head, missed her by less than an inch, buried itself in a wall, the heavy palm-wood handle jerking crazily from side to side like an ill-regulated pendulum. By this time she had ducked, had run down the remaining flight of stairs, and, through the back door, into the garden.

She made straight for the crimson, clanking turmoil that was coiling everywhere, straight for the thick of the fight where the Mongols were desperately trying to stem the Arab attack, with the wicked whine of spears cutting through the air, with dagger points nosing for the chinks in body armor, and shield crashing against shield in charge and parry. She raised her voice high above the savage, guttural war cries and the shrieks of the dying as swords and lances struck home:

“Ahmed! O Ahmed! Thief of Bagdad!”

She saw him, fighting on foot now. She tried to slip through the forest of forged iron, to reach his side.

Upstairs, Zobeid was cornered. She stood erect and proud. The Prince of the Mongols bowed ironically, spoke ironically:

“It is—alas!—necessary that you accompany me without the proper marriage ceremonies. They shall be performed as soon as we arrive in my country.” He stepped on the rug and extended a slim yellow hand: “Be pleased to join me, Zobeid!”

“No!” she exclaimed. “No!”

“Ah!” he smiled, “can it be, indeed, that you do not love me?”

“I hate you!”

“Hate; too, spices the sauce of passion. Come!” His voice grew stern, and as she receded a step: “It is useless to resist, Crusher of Hearts. For consider the ancient proverb: On the egg combating with the stone, the yolk came out.”

“No, no, no!” she cried again.

“I regret,” he rejoined, “that I shall have to use force.”

He gave an order to the Mongol soldiers. Zobeid resisted. But she was helpless. They lifted her on the rug. They held her there.

Already the Prince had spoken to the rug: "O magic flying carpet, carry us to . . ." when suddenly his words were cut off in mid-air.

For there came a shrill, high, triumphant war cry:

"*Allah akbar! Allah akbar!*" and, the next moment, invisible hands came out of the nowhere; invisible hands sent the Mongol soldiers spinning in all directions; invisible hands struck Cham Sheng square between the eyes; invisible hands picked up the Princess Zobeid and carried her away, out of the room, up the staircase; while invisible lips gave again the shrill, mocking war cry:

"*Allah akbar! Allah akbar!*"

Invisible hands and lips. The hands and lips of Ahmed, the Thief of Bagdad.

For a minute earlier, down in the garden, Zemzem had reached his side through the torrid, clanking forest of weapons. From beneath the dropping, swishing, crimson blades she had cried out to him, and it had not needed more than her first words: "Zobeid—the flying

carpet—hurry—O hurry!” to make him understand what was happening.

He catapulted himself toward the palace gate. A giant Tartar captain stepped square into his path. Lance then against lance. Thrust and cut against thrust and cut. Skill and strength against skill and strength. The lance jerking up, skidding from the ground with a dry rasp of its bamboo shaft, lunging viciously. The Thief of Bagdad wheeling nimbly out of harm’s way while his sword, thrice whirled round the head, descended like lightning in a slanting direction. Forged steel biting through flesh and muscle and tissue and bone. A darkening blotch of blood spreading grotesque arabesques over dragon-embroidered tunic. A choked death gurgle. And Ahmed leaping over the fallen man; Zemzem by his side, leaping parallel, like a small terrier by the side of a lean-flanked greyhound.

On the threshold of the palace was a wall of steel-bossed arm shields, topped by a wall of yellow, high-cheeked faces, a wall of glittering, oval-bladed lances: Cham Sheng’s picked

Manchu bodyguard, here to fight for their master to their last drop of blood.

They were too many for one man to attack and defeat.

Ahmed stopped for a moment. Then he remembered the Cloak of Invisibility which he had found at the bottom of the Midnight Sea, wrapped about the magic silver box: the cloak to guard him against the jealousies and envies of the unrighteous.

He tore it from his waist shawl. He flung it quickly about his shoulders. He could still see the Manchu warriors. But could they see him?

He wondered. The very next second he knew. For one of them, who had been on the point of thrusting at him with his lance, dropped the weapon and stared in open-mouthed, rather ludicrous astonishment.

"Where—why—how——" he stammered. "Where has he gone to?"

He moved away from the threshold to search for this man who had so miraculously vanished into thin air; and Ahmed used the opportunity to slip through, into the palace, and up the

stairs where—as we related before—he sent the Mongols spinning, smote Cham Sheng across the face, picked up Zobeid where she stood on the flying carpet, and ran away with her, carrying her high in his arms.

She did not see him. The cloak hid him so completely. But love needs no eyes. Somehow, by the thrill and tumult in her heart, she felt who he was; she knew; and she laughed, happily, while the Mongols, led by their Prince—their first surprise and stupor over—dashed after them, following the sound of Ahmed's rushing feet, the sound of Zobeid's high laughter.

But by this time their comrades down in the garden had died to the last man beneath the Moslem swords. The Arabs came charging into the palace. There was a play and counterplay of bare blades and many individual heroic deeds, by both Mongols and Arabs, of which the ancient chronicle makes much, until at last—though Arab and Mongol historians, while both admitting the same result, differ as to the cause, the former claiming that it was due to their bravery and their faith in Islam, while the

latter say they were outnumbered ten to one and demand with rather pertinent irony what would have happened to their enemies had it not been for Ahmed's miraculous seeds—until at last the Arabs were victorious and all the Mongols were dead.

All except two: Cham Sheng and Wong K'ai, who protected his master with his body.

Already swords were raised to cut them down when a high voice—it was that of Bird-of-Evil, Ahmed's old partner in knavery and thievery, who had just arrived on the scene—declared shrilly that such a death was too good for them.

"String them up!" he yelled.

"A splendid idea—by Allah and by Allah!"

So through one of the windows in an upper room they stuck a tall, stout pole, fastening it securely; and, a few minutes later, Cham Sheng and Wong K'ai were hanging by their necks, slowly strangling to death.

Such was the end of the Prince of the Mongols. But even at the very moment of final oblivion, while his soul was already leaping the Dragon Gate to join the souls of his ancestors

near the Seven Yellow Springs, his lips, blue and twisted and tortured into a painful grimace, uttered the proud boast of his race:

“Others of my race will come after me! Again and again the world will quail and fall before the Mongol scourge!”

The boast was not heard—would have been ridiculed had it been heard.

“Tiger!”—a little, golden-skinned Arab slave girl cried down in the garden, looking up at the Mongol Prince’s dangling corpse. “Pah! Paper tiger with paper teeth!”

“God be praised!” chanted the priests.

“God be praised!” shouted the warriors.

“God be praised indeed!” echoed the Caliph of Bagdad, who had been released from his dungeon, as had the Princes of Persia and India. He turned to a majordomo. “Where is this mighty hero who freed us from the Mongol scourge?”

“He is with your daughter, Heaven-Born. Up there—in the throne room.”

“Tell him to come to me and accept my kingly thanks. By the way—who is he?”

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The majordomo bowed deeply, stammered in embarrassment:

“May the Heaven-Born forgive the lowest of his slaves. But the man who freed us from the Mongol yoke is none other than the Thief of Bagdad!”

“No longer Thief of Bagdad!” laughed the Caliph. “But heir to the throne of Bagdad and, after my death, by the token of his marriage to my daughter, caliph of all the Faithful, Shadow of Allah upon Earth, King of the Sovereigns of the Universe, and Supreme Ruler in Islam!”

And “Heir to the throne of Bagdad!” he greeted Ahmed when the latter, side by side with Zobeid, came into the room.

He overwhelmed him with his gratitude, kissing him on both cheeks, elevating him on the spot to various ranks, titles, and splendid emoluments. The courtiers and soldiers, the priests and the Princes of India and Persia followed suit, kissing him, embracing him, shaking his hands, until Ahmed, blushing with confusion, stepped on the magic flying rug, his arm still about Zobeid’s waist.

"I am awfully sorry," he said, "but I shall have to leave you. You see, a few moments ago this worthy"—pointing at a green-turbaned priest, the very priest who had first sent him on his journey in the search of life's happiness—"united Zobeid and me in holy matrimony. And now, with the permission of all of you or without it, we are going on our honeymoon." He turned to the magic rug. "Fly!" he ordered. "Fly away, O rug!"

"Where to?" asked the Caliph.

"Up to the moon! Up to the land of happiness and laughter and sweetness and love and little children!"

"Drop in on me on your way," cried the Prince of Persia, his heart warming with generosity as the rug rose into the air, "and I shall have such a feast prepared for you that it will go down in history!"

"Visit me at Puri!" shouted the Prince of India, not to be outdone by the Persian in generosity, craning his neck as the rug rose still higher, "and I shall introduce you to my divine cousin, the goddess Doorga!"

Ahmed did not reply. He waved his left

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arm—his right was still about Zobeid's waist—and so the flying rug carried them out of the palace, out of the garden, out of Bagdad, high through the air, up to the moon, on their wedding journey, where many fantastic and extraordinary adventures befell them.

“But this,” says the ancient Arab chronicle, “is another story. . . .”

THE END



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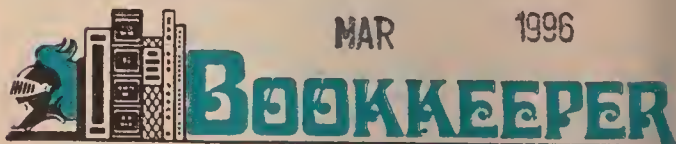
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